

Also by Charlotte Russell

Gentlemen of Honor
[One Wicked Weekend](#)
[Under the Kissing Bough](#)
[Stranded with the Earl](#)

His & Hers
[His Duchess](#)

Phoenix Sidewinders
[Hot Corner](#)

Standalone
[Splendor in the Moss](#)
[Beholden](#)

Watch for more at [Charlotte Russell's site](#).

Table of Contents

Also By Charlotte Russell

“Russell’s debut hits all the sweet spots in historical romance—political plots, spies, and secrets, along with ‘true love.’”

Beholden | Charlotte Russell

Copyright ©2017 Charlotte Russell | All rights reserved. Unless specifically noted, no part of this publication may be reproduced, scanned, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of the author. The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or by any other means without the permission of the author is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions. Your support of the author’s rights is appreciated. | Book cover design by Holly Perret, 2020 | www.theswooniesbookcovers.com | PUBLISHER’S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

To the Rainy Day Writers | Love you all!

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Chapter Twenty-five

Chapter Twenty-six

Chapter Twenty-seven

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[~THE END~](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Sign up for Charlotte Russell's Mailing List](#)

[Also By Charlotte Russell](#)

[About the Author](#)



“Russell’s debut hits all the sweet spots in historical romance—political plots, spies, and secrets, along with ‘true love.’”



—Library Journal on *A Spy’s Honor*



**CAN A MARRIAGE DEEPLY REGRETTED BY BOTH PARTIES
EVER BE SAVED?**

Despite his vow to remain a bachelor and sire no children, Octavius Rupert Henry Mayne, eighth earl of Lexden, wed Eleanor Dryden. Their physical connection was explosive—and brief. Regretting the marriage almost before the vow left his lips, Lex banished his new wife to the country.

Now, six years later, she must return. Lex needs her like he needs a backfiring rifle: her fiery temper, her flashing green eyes, the elemental attraction he’s never been able to shake...and her desire to talk. However, in a bid to destroy an old enemy, Lex must have her help.

A countess in name only, Eleanor wants nothing to do with this farcical play Lex calls marriage. She will not be silent and compliant. She will not leave “her” son behind. Forced to confront a recalcitrant sister, interfering parents, and that devious enemy, Eleanor soon realizes her husband isn’t quite the monster she thought. But one fateful mistake might cost them the chance at a marriage full of love and devotion.



Beholden



Charlotte Russell



Copyright ©2017 Charlotte Russell

All rights reserved. Unless specifically noted, no part of this publication may be reproduced, scanned, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of the author. The scanning, uploading and distribution of this book via the Internet or by any other means without the permission of the author is illegal and punishable by law. Please purchase only authorized electronic editions. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

**Book cover design by Holly Perret,
2020**

www.theswooniesbookcovers.com

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of

fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.





To the Rainy Day Writers

Love you all!





Prologue



Lexden House, Mayfair

27 June 1812

Eleanor,

Your presence is required in London. Return to Hereford Street with all due haste.

Lex



MAYNE CASTLE, ESSEX

27 June 1812

Dear Lexden,

I am disheartened to hear from you after these six years. There is nothing of interest to me in London. I am quite content to remain here in Essex, thank you all the same. Though you did not inquire, I will happily inform you that our son (his name is Henry, if you will recall) has reached his fifth year in good health and recently learned to read.

Eleanor



28 JUNE 1812

Eleanor,

Perhaps you misread my note. I did not *invite* you to London. Do not ignore my commands again. Present yourself at Lexden House by Saturday.

Lex



28 JUNE 1812

Dear Octavius,

I thoroughly understood your previous note. As I mentioned when you banished me, I want nothing to do with your despicable self. As per our agreement, I shall remain here until my dying day—or yours, whichever comes first.

Your disobedient servant,

Eleanor



29 JUNE 1812

Madam,

At this time, I have no desire to uphold our agreement. I require the presence of my wife in London. If you do not arrive by the first of the month, you may rest assured that your son will be immediately—and permanently—removed from your care.

Your lawful *husband*,

Lexden



29 JUNE 1812

Sir,

Obviously, the years have wrought no changes to your ignoble nature. Henry and I are packing our belongings as I write this. We will arrive in London in two days.

Your wife—in name only,

Eleanor



30 JUNE 1812

Eleanor,

It brings me satisfaction that this matter is now resolved. I do not, however, see any reason for the boy to accompany you. He will remain at Mayne Castle.

Yours,

Lex



Chapter One



Eleanor stared up at the brass number nine centered above the ebony door of Lexden House. She'd thought to never again cross this threshold.

Perhaps *never* was too strong. Her son would be the ninth Earl of Lexden someday. Such an event would require the death of the eighth earl, Octavius. A pleasant thought—in the abstract, of course. She would never wish anyone dead, not even her wretched...husband. She shuddered at the word. No, she merely wished Octavius at Jericho. Or any place she wasn't. Her wishes were so simple. Why couldn't he have left her in peace?

"Mama! Look over there. A park!"

Her son's excited voice and insistent tugging on her sleeve broke through her reverie and brought Eleanor back to the cacophonous corner of Hereford Street and Park Lane. She had forgotten how loud London was. And dangerous. As Henry's brown gaze settled longingly on Hyde Park, she snatched up his hand lest he dash into the rush of carriages, carts, and horses careening down Park Lane, and she squeezed his warm fingers. "We shall visit the park as soon as we're comfortably situated, my sweet."

She would never be comfortable at Lexden House, but her boy didn't need to know that.

"Will the earl come with us?"

Eleanor bit back her usual reply. She had reminded Henry over and over again that "the earl" the servants spoke of was his father. But the little boy had never met Octavius, so she could hardly blame Henry for having no desire to call him Father.

"We can ask him," she said breezily, fairly certain of the negative response they would receive. She would deal with that situation when it arose. "I think we'd best go inside. We're

expected.”

Well, *she* was. Henry wasn't. However, after Octavius's threat to remove him from her care, she had no recourse but to keep her son close.

One of their accompanying footmen had already ascended the steps and knocked on the door. It swung open as Eleanor looked up. She inhaled deeply and pushed her shoulders back. Time to face her husband.

Octavius, with his dark, forbidding eyes and inability to muster any facial expression other than a glower, unnerved her, but she'd vowed six years ago to let him never see her unease. Whatever he wanted of her, she would be strong. Strong enough to stifle her disgusting physical attraction to him as well, which had nearly been her undoing in the past.

All this she would bear for Henry's sake.

Thus emboldened, she guided her son up the steps and through the door. The entrance hall, with its slick marble floor, embossed walls, silver sconces and austere butler, was exactly as she remembered.

The ever-brITTLE Bickley bowed slightly, the creaking of his bones probably only a figment of Eleanor's imagination. "My lady. Lord Corby. Welcome back."

There was nothing at all welcoming in his tone, but then Bickley had never warmed to Eleanor in the scant few months she'd lived here at the beginning of the marriage. He'd always looked at her askance, as if she were not worthy of calling herself Lady Lexden. And in the grand hierarchy of Society, he was undoubtedly correct, for the Earl of Lexden had married the daughter of an impoverished and singularly undistinguished gentleman.

She nodded and said, "Thank you," nevertheless attempting to prove him wrong.

He turned without another word and led them up the stairs.

Henry leaned against Eleanor's hip and whispered, "Who is Lord Corby?"

"You are," she replied with a smile. No one at Mayne Castle addressed her boy by his courtesy title, a fact which would probably irritate Octavius—or possibly not, given his parting accusation regarding her babe's parentage.

Bickley showed her and Henry into the drab, lifeless sitting room she had always hated. "I will inform his lordship of your

arrival when he returns.”

Eleanor whipped around. “He’s not here?”

“No.”

Octavius had known when they would arrive. He’d demanded her presence. Now he wasn’t even here to greet them? She wanted to fume. She wanted to unequivocally state her thoughts on the nature and manners of the man she’d married, but she could act like a “worthy lady” even if she was not one.

“He will return at what time?”

The butler straightened to an impressive height. “I have no idea.”

With that, Eleanor and her son were left alone.



TODAY WAS THE DAY HIS wife would arrive.

So, that morning, Octavius, eighth Earl of Lexden, had left the house.

He’d spent an hour venting his frustrations in the boxing ring at Jackson’s Saloon. He stopped by Weston’s to order new boots. He went to Tattersall’s to look over the horses, even though he had no interest in purchasing one, and by late afternoon he sat in a shadowy corner of Boodle’s Club, the other members dutifully ignoring him as he wished, and contemplated his idiocy.

What had he done? He did not need a wife to set up a new business. He did not need a wife to exact revenge. But she was on her way to London at his command, and now they must pretend, before all and sundry, they had a good marriage.

Because never in a million years would the eighth Earl of Lexden admit to the *ton* that his marriage was just as disastrous as his parents’ had been.

“Lord Lexden? Your guest has arrived.”

At last. Lex followed the footman to the entrance of the club where a slim older gentleman bowed in his direction.

Lex reached out to shake his hand. “Mr. Robson.”

“Lexden.” Elliot Robson’s grip was firm, and except for his thick silver hair the man looked much younger than his sixty years. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you after our lengthy correspondence.”

“Please, call me Lex.” He wanted—no, *needed*—to foster a good relationship with Robson. With his unwitting assistance, Lex would ruin William Drummond, seducer of wives and thorough

blackguard, once and for all.

A smile split Robson's tanned face and he drawled, "My wife calls you my mistress. Says I've written you more letters than she could ever hope to receive from me."

Lex wasn't one for teasing, but the older man's words seemed less offensive when spoken with that friendly American accent. He nodded with what he hoped was a pleasant expression and then gestured down the passage. "We can talk this way."

He led Robson to the quietest corner of the club's sitting room. At this time of day, Lord Hatterden snored away on the sofa nearest them, but the nasal drone soon faded into the background.

After ordering sherry, Lex and Robson settled into leather armchairs, a small mahogany table between like the Atlantic separating England and America.

"How was your voyage?" Lex asked, propping one booted foot across his knee.

"Oh, we had moments when Mrs. Robson and I were on our knees, looking heavenward, but by and large they were an uneventful few weeks. I appreciate your willingness to postpone this meeting for a day while we reunited with our Andrew." Robson leaned over the arm of his chair. "I am not sure how Mrs. Robson and I can ever repay you for what you did for our son. I do hope he has shown the appropriate gratitude...."

Lex pressed back against his chair, feeling pinned and trapped. He needed a solid relationship with Robson, a *business* relationship. Excesses of emotions of any kind left him feeling...nauseated.

"As I stated in my letters, gratitude is unnecessary."

Besides, Lex was the grateful one. His actions in assisting Andrew Robson had led to an acquaintance with the elder Robson, and now he had the advantage over Drummond's family. But, speaking of the man, where was Andrew? He was supposed to be here, easing Lex's way with his father. Lex and Andrew weren't close by any means, but if Lex *had* to name a friend, Andrew Robson was the only person he could think of.

He threw back a healthy amount of his sherry and changed the topic to one with which he was more comfortable. "Did you encounter any trouble with the customs officials?"

"Not at all. Your British customs officers were more curious than suspicious upon seeing a crate full of American rifles. I showed them your letter of introduction anyway. When they saw I had only

the one crate and that you intended the rifles as models for a new manufacturing process, they stamped my papers willingly enough.” Robson flashed a grim smile. “I realize that the United States is a mere bee buzzing in the ear of England while she’s confronted by a tiger, but I must tell you there is a faction in America pushing hard for war. I received a rather stern warning from my government before we sailed.”

With the shift in subject away from the personal, some of the strain in Lex’s muscles eased. “I can ease your worries on that front. Just last week Lord Liverpool finalized the repeal of the Orders in Council, as your government has been demanding. England will no longer prevent neutral ships from engaging in free trade.”

“Indeed, that should put an end to talk of war between our countries.” Robson raised his glass in a toast. “I salute your new prime minister’s sense.”

Lex returned the gesture. War between their countries would do neither of them any good: an odd thought to have when their business was rifles, but there it was. The damned French provided more than enough combat for England. What Lex needed from America, from Robson, was knowledge and experience.

He wasn’t accustomed to asking anyone else’s opinion, but that was the whole point of inviting this man to England. Having spent eight years as the superintendent of Harpers Ferry Armory, Elliot Robson knew all there was to know about producing mass quantities of rifles—quickly. Lex needed that efficiency established at his own arsenal in order to wrest the government contract from its current supplier, a company in which the Drummond family was heavily invested.

To Robson he said, “Hear, hear. Now that you are safely arrived, we may carry on with our work without concern.”

“Lex. Father dearest.” Andrew Robson suddenly dropped into the chair across from Lex before Lex could rise in greeting. “Look at you two getting on so famously.”

Lex wasn’t so certain of that, but Andrew’s easygoing manner should help carry the conversation. And even if his was the blame for Eleanor’s imminent arrival, Lex was still glad of the man’s company.

“Son, you were supposed to be here thirty minutes ago,” Robson chastised.

“Then you should have told me to arrive a half hour before

then,” Andrew fired back, giving a cheeky grin. His thick dark hair and animated eyes were exact replicas of his father’s, though where Robson’s eyes were a bright blue, Andrew’s were green. “You’ve forgotten that I operate on ‘Andrew time.’”

Robson shook his head. “Oh, I hadn’t forgotten. I merely hoped that four years of living on your own in a foreign country had matured you.”

“Maturation is for wine, not for men, Father.”

This father-son repartee made Lex just as uncomfortable as talk of Robson’s gratitude. He leaned forward, ready to rise. “Gentlemen, my carriage is waiting to take us to the arsenal.”

Robson wagged a well-manicured finger at him. “I do admire your enthusiasm, but let us not forget that my wife and I are here for more than business.”

Not Mrs. Robson. Lex must steer the subject away from wives. He hadn’t, after all, seen his own in six years. Nor would he be doing so today if not for the Robsons.

“Of a certainty there will be time for entertainment later. For now, however, the building—”

“I look forward to assisting you with your manufacturing, but”—the older gentleman’s voice hardened just a notch—“my wife and I also anticipate spending time with our son and seeing much more of London. Not to mention meeting Lady Lexden.” His silver eyebrows flew aloft. “Or do you call her Lady Lex?”

Lex called her a thorn in his side. He called her the regret of his life. He called her punishment for the most foolhardy thing he had ever done. The last thing he wanted to speak of was his unfaithful spouse. Nor did he want Eleanor’s face—with her thick, honey-brown hair, discerning hazel eyes, and that ridiculously upturned nose—taking root in his mind. He willed the image away.

Andrew slid him a telling look, as if to say *Didn’t I warn you?*

“Good heavens, lad,” Robson exclaimed, “why the dour face when I mention your wife?”

Lex shifted, recrossing his legs. At nine and twenty, he hadn’t been called “lad” since he’d inherited the earldom seventeen years ago. Unbidden, images and words swirled through his mind: A man whose smile lit up his world. *Father*. The day that smile disappeared forever. That bloody rug. So much blood. Calamity. Death.

He swallowed the rest of his sherry, drowning the memories and their accompanying grief, and with stoic effort attended the matter

at hand.

Eleanor.

He'd never planned for her to come to London. He had intended to use the same excuse he always did in her regard: *Due to the fragile health of my heir, Lord Corby, my wife resides at Mayne Castle in Essex. I visit as often as I'm able, but she is loath to leave him for any length of time.* Usually he even kept from choking on the word "heir." But Andrew Robson had sworn his father wouldn't—or couldn't—focus entirely on business.

Yet, no one knew of Eleanor's arrival. Perhaps he could reiterate her unavailability and send her back. Perhaps he could—

Robson cleared his throat, disrupting the awkward silence. "We don't mean to impose upon you. However, with the two of us apt to spend much of our time at the arsenal, my wife hopes Lady Lexden will be able to spare her an afternoon now and then."

Lex clamped his lips down, stifling the wealth of curses piling up on his tongue. He *had* to keep Robson happy. The man had refused his offer of a salary or even payment for his passage to England. *You saved my son's life, I couldn't possibly...* So Lex was at the mercy of Robson's continued goodwill if he wanted the American's expertise.

Something—irritation?—flashed through Robson's blue eyes, and Lex rushed to speak.

"Happily"—he could not call her Lady Lexden—"Eleanor is arriving in Town today. She cannot wait to entertain you and Mrs. Robson." If she had to be here, then the two of them would put a happy marriage on display for Society and the Robsons. But, hellfire! He attempted a smile, ignoring the unnatural stretching of his skin and the roiling of his stomach.

Robson crossed one leg over the other. "Excellent. I hope that means your son is faring better?"

My—?

Lex forced his head against the back of his chair in order to keep it from falling forward in misery. He must have mentioned the usual lie about the child's health in one of his letters to Robson. There weren't enough curses to aptly express his frustration—and panic. *How* was he going to live with Eleanor again?

Somehow he would, because the Drummonds must be destroyed.

However, as he'd told Eleanor, he would not tolerate that child under his roof.

“Lord Corby is still ailing, but Eleanor has found a competent nurse to care for him in her absence.”

Robson nodded. “Good, good. I imagine she needs a respite. Tending a sick child is distressing work.”

They were back to emotions. And family. Lex swallowed the bile creeping up his throat and mustered every last drop of graciousness he possessed, which probably numbered no more than two. The conversation must be returned to its course. “Indeed. In the meantime, if it is not agreeable today, what day would be best to visit the arsenal?”

“Fetch me from Grillion’s Hotel at half past two tomorrow. I look forward to assisting you. I’ve missed my work at Harpers Ferry.”

Lex nodded in satisfaction. “Andrew, will you join us?”

His friend laughed. “I think not. I’m off to Bath in the morning.”

“What could possibly be of interest in Bath?”

“Yes, do tell, son,” Robson spoke up. “What’s of more interest than spending time with the parents you haven’t seen in four years?”

For once, Lex’s friend looked a little guilty. “I apologize, Father. Something’s come up in regard to my studies, and I’m needed there urgently. I should return in a fortnight. I promise. Besides, you’ll be here for months. There’s plenty of time for you to harangue me.”

Mr. Robson didn’t look happy, but he accepted Andrew’s hearty handshake and Lex’s more restrained one and followed the footman out. Only after the American left did Lex realize he’d forgotten to take him to task for calling an earl of the realm “lad.” Tomorrow he would clarify the matter.

Andrew Robson sank into the chair his father had vacated and crossed his boots at the ankle. “Well, that didn’t go too poorly.”

Lex shot him a repressed look. “I blame you.”

Robson snorted. “Most people do. But why?”

“You convinced me your father wouldn’t stay if my wife wasn’t around to entertain your mother.”

Andrew accepted the glass of sherry the footman offered. “And I was right, was I not? He’ll be much more productive if my mother is entertained. Besides, I’m sure your wife will appreciate a little time away from her maternal duties, and she’ll keep my parents out of my pocket.”

What Lex wanted to say was: *You should be grateful you have*

parents who love you. What he said instead was, “I thought you were studying in Edinburgh, not Bath.”

Andrew finished off his sherry and rose. “In Edinburgh I study anatomy. In Bath I study the female form. I much prefer Bath.”

Lex stayed seated. “Must you go? We could attend the theatre, or I might even be persuaded to accompany you to one of those gaming hells you enjoy so much.”

Andrew laughed. “Desperation doesn’t become you, Lex. Have no worries, I will return as promised. In the meantime, enjoy the company of my parents, which is generally very pleasant—especially if you aren’t one of the offspring they like to lecture.”

With that, the man was gone, and a glance around the club did not produce a viable alternative for Lex. He’d succeeded far too well at cultivating a standoffish personality, and there wasn’t a gentleman present who would welcome his company. Oh, to be sure, their wives still issued invitations to Lexden House in an odd quest to secure the appearance of the *ton*’s most reclusive peer, but Lex knew they didn’t truly care to socialize with the heir of the mad and broken Mayne family. So with a despondent sigh he rose, deciding not to let Eleanor believe her presence was keeping him away.

As he trudged up Hereford Street, he could see fashionable carriages jostling for entry to Hyde Park. As Lex neared Lexden House, he braced himself for his first meeting with his wife.

Bickley opened the door just as his booted foot hit the top step, timing impeccable as ever. Lex handed over his cane and hat, looking a question at his oldest retainer.

“In the nursery, my lord.”

Already on his way to the staircase, Lex stopped. “What?”

Bickley lifted his nose. “Her ladyship”—the butler knew better than to call her Lady Lexden in Lex’s presence—“is in the nursery. With Lord Corby.”

Devil take it, he’d told her not to bring the boy.

Lex marched up the stairs.



Chapter Two



He paused on the landing. A lighthearted feminine giggle wafted out of the nearest doorway.

Lex stalked over and stared into the room.

Eleanor sat on a dusty rug with her legs tucked under the drab skirts of her traveling gown, maneuvering his old tin soldiers into position. Next to her knelt the boy, a solid child with thick, tousled hair the color of a rifle stock. He gently reprimanded his mother, “No, Mama, you must form into a square. That’s the way to defeat a cavalry attack.”

The mere sight of the two of them, huddled together in easy companionship, in the nursery of all places, wrenched the breath from Lex’s lungs. His throat constricted and he struggled for air.

Damn her.

He knocked a fist against his chest, loosening his airway. When he’d taken a normal breath, he said, “Eleanor.”

She started, most likely at the harsh tone he’d used. Ignoring the boy, Lex focused on her. The rage seething within him blunted the force of her fresh-faced beauty.

“I instructed you not to bring the child. You disobeyed me, Eleanor.”

“You threatened me, Octavius.” Rising, she brushed at her skirts, setting a small cloud of dust afloat.

He nearly growled. “My name is Lex.”

Her honey-colored eyebrows lifted, forming perfect arches over those damnably perceptive eyes. “Oddly enough, the baptismal record at the church in Lexden reads, ‘Octavius Rupert Henry Mayne.’”

Through gritted teeth he managed, “Nevertheless, I’ve told you to call me Lex.”

Her smile was maddeningly cheerful. "Nevertheless, I refuse to."

She never missed an opportunity to contravene him. Her defiance was the reason he'd sent her away six years ago.

One of the reasons.

She'd not changed. Still, he had to endure her presence. He'd told Robson she would be available to entertain Mrs. Robson. He did not, however, have to countenance the child.

"I will not have that by-blow in my house."

Eleanor gasped, rushing to the boy's side. "Henry, wait for me in the sitting room. The room where we had tea."

"But, Mama, I haven't been introduced to the earl yet."

Out of the corner of his eye, Lex saw the boy peeking around Eleanor's skirts. He was about to order the child to do as he was told when she spoke again.

"Henry, do as I asked."

The boy sent a hopeful look Lex's way, but Lex pretended not to notice. Face hung with utter disappointment, the youngster trudged out of the room.

Lex steeled his jaw, erasing that image from his mind. Eleanor slipped over and closed the door, giving him a wide berth, which he didn't mind in the least. It seemed not to matter that he hadn't seen her in six years or that he loathed her unfaithful character and contrary disposition; she was still too damned attractive.

She rounded on him. "How dare you! Do not ever repeat your filthy accusations in front of Henry again."

She clung to the doorknob, her hazel eyes flashing darkly. Lex wanted to demand she send the child back to Mayne Castle. Hell, he wanted to send *her* back. But he needed Eleanor, and he needed her biddable, not angrier than a wet cat.

He made no reply, refusing to acknowledge her demand. He was content enough to stare at her, to dream of setting her unruly mane free of its pins, to itch with the need to kiss those defiant lips and soothe away the wariness lingering in her eyes.

No. A string of curses blasted through his brain. Six years on, his disgraceful lust for his adulterous wife still endured. He was truly madder than his father ever had been.

She lifted her chin, tilting that upturned nose into the air even farther. "I cannot change your erroneous thinking, but I will not have you espousing your vulgar theory to all and sundry." Something akin to horror crept into her eyes. "Unless you've

already done so?"

He scoffed. "The last thing I want is to admit I've been cuckolded."

The very last thing. History *could not* repeat itself.

"You haven't been cuck—"

"Enough," he barked. He had been. She'd had an affair with William Drummond, and he would never forget it.

"You complicate matters, Eleanor." But not as much as she might hope. Compromise felt as uncomfortable as a coarse wool shirt; however, he could use the boy to make her comply. Besides, it wasn't as if he would ever have to *see* William Drummond's bastard. This would be the last trip Lex ever made to the nursery, which is where the boy would remain.

"The horses are too worn out for a return trip to Essex. For the time being, the child may stay—here in the nursery."

Eleanor looked confused rather than grateful, and Lex hated it when she seemed vulnerable. He'd spent two-thirds of his life repairing the damage vulnerability and its insipid partner, love, had wrought. He'd made himself impenetrable, so why couldn't others do the same? Why give anyone the power to wound?

Her hand slid from the knob, and Lex took the opportunity. He moved quickly and yanked the door open. But something kept him from walking out. The too-near scent of her? She reminded him of flowers that had been carefully tended in the Mayne Castle conservatory.

She was staring up at him, those hazel eyes more golden than green this day, attempting to breach his long-held defenses. Another thing he didn't like about her: her inability to let matters lie. He wouldn't deny she'd married a churlish brute, but that was that. She'd come out well enough in the bargain, not only a countess, but freed from her family's persistent poverty. Must she ask for more?

God, he hoped he could conclude his business with Robson soon.

"Dinner is served at seven," he said. Eying her wrinkled, dusty traveling gown with disparagement, he added, "Don't forget to change."



ELEANOR STEPPED INTO the dining room at precisely seven o'clock. Not because she cared to be on time for Octavius, but because she wanted this dinner ordeal over as soon as possible.

A footman greeted her politely, if warily, and seated her at one end of the table. Surely all the servants must wonder why she had returned. Even she was curious as to the purpose of her visit, for that's what this was: merely a visit. She could not *live* with Octavius.

When they married, the Earl of Lexden had been a sometimes fractious, mostly aloof young man who treated her with civility. She hadn't been entirely satisfied with their polite interactions, but if he'd ever shown her the slightest bit of affection she would have easily been halfway down the path to falling in love. He hadn't though, and when he discovered she was pregnant, all pretense of even a polite marriage vanished. Her husband had turned mean and spiteful, accusing her of carrying another man's child. She'd been relieved more than anything when he ordered her to Mayne Castle.

Not that she had been physically afraid of Octavius. However, the occasional glimpses of pain in his angry eyes struck terror into her heart. As far-fetched as it seemed, the emotionally forbidding Octavius might have a vulnerable side—one she was cursedly drawn to. Luckily, he was determined to keep it caged and silenced. Otherwise, danger lay that way.

Eleanor shook herself and looked to the other end of the table. Octavius had not yet arrived—surprising, since she knew he valued punctuality. Punctuality and money. And authority.

His own, of course.

The footman slid a bowl of mushroom soup in front of her. How odd, that she was to begin without her husband.

But she did, and her thoughts wandered to Henry. When she'd met up with her child in the sitting room he'd been quite out of charity with her; however, his mood brightened considerably when she informed him he could sleep in her bed that night, the nursery not being habitable yet.

Habitable? It might be that one day, but it would never be home to her and Henry. Regarding Octavius's hateful insinuations, Eleanor obviously needed to lay down some rules.

Ha! When had Octavius ever done anything but what *he* wanted? He'd been allowed great latitude since the day of his birth, much like any heir to an earldom.

The footman removed her soup bowl and slipped a plate of roasted capon and boiled asparagus onto the table, which finally jostled her brain awake. There had been no need to change into

another gown, no need to even come down. She could have eaten in her chamber. Octavius was not going to join her. Yet her husband's tone had indicated she must appear for dinner.

What boorish behavior. She should have expected no less, but sometimes one couldn't control one's expectations. Replacing her napkin on the table, she stood and addressed the footman.

"Pardon me. What is your name?"

"I'm Richard, my lady."

If she sat back down now and kept her mouth shut, she could enjoy her dinner in peace. But Eleanor could not leave well enough alone. She'd spent much of her life being overlooked, and now, at twenty-seven, she finally realized no one else was going to advocate for her.

"Richard, does Lord Lexden intend to join me?"

The servant had the grace to look abashed. "No, my lady."

"Do you know where he is?"

Richard hesitated, but only a moment. "Mr. Bickley took a tray to the study."

Eleanor gave the young man a brave smile and then sailed off down the corridor.

A perfunctory knock on the study door elicited a deep-voiced command to enter. Eleanor flung open the door, but, after that, temerity escaped her, for she realized how foolish she was to beard the lion in its den. Especially foolish when her body's betrayal proved just how base she was. She wouldn't soon forget the image of Lexden sprawled in a leather chair in his shirtsleeves, his buff pantaloons stretched tightly across quiver-inducing muscular thighs, though he immediately got to his feet at the sight of her.

Her thighs did quiver. Her breasts tingled. And she hated, hated, hated herself for those reactions.

"Eleanor."

His scowl, complete with deep v-shaped marks between his eyebrows, reminded her of her mission.

Taking a deep breath in order to dispel the desire vibrating through her body and the heat radiating from her cheeks, she asked, "Why must I bother to dress and come down for dinner when I am to dine alone?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You must accustom yourself to playing hostess."

She couldn't look away from the linen drawn taut across his

shoulders, and her cheeks nearly blistered as she struggled to find her voice. "D-do you think I didn't entertain at Mayne Castle?"

"Who did you entertain?" he asked with repressed indignity.

Sometimes Octavius could be so righteous that she wanted to laugh, but one glance at his forbidding glower cured her of that notion. "The vicar and his wife, the Misses Amberston, Sir Geoffrey..."

Her husband grunted and turned away, slipping his chocolate-colored waistcoat back on. Shot through with gold thread, it fairly sparkled in the firelight—as did his brown eyes, the flames making them glow with false warmth.

Eleanor needed to get away. She gave him the glare she reserved for a disobedient Henry. "My dinner is getting cold. I merely wanted you to know how rude and disrespectful I find your behavior. Good night, Octavius."

She escaped without looking at his face again, not wanting to see his reaction. He was undoubtedly impervious to her remarks, and she didn't need to feel the painfully cold stab of his indifference.

Returning to the dining room, she began to eat her tepid capon. How long must she endure here? Not just endure, but also entertain. Put on an agreeable face for Lord knows who. Elevated persons who would look down their angular noses at her, who would frown on the countess who'd been pulled from the bottom social rung and then shunted off to the country less than a year after her marriage.

She took a bite of asparagus, which now tasted like tree bark, and realized she was no longer hungry. Why had she even returned to the dining room? There was no need.

Suddenly, a fully-clothed Octavius strode into the room, trailed by a footman carrying a plate and a napkin. Her husband seated himself at the opposite end of the table, and Richard hurried to pour him a glass of wine.

With a sudden self-consciousness, Eleanor closed her gaping mouth. Her heart beat doubly fast, an annoyance she didn't want to contemplate. She grasped her wine goblet and took two steadying swallows.

"I have invited Mr. and Mrs. Robson, newly arrived from America, for dinner tomorrow," Octavius announced, as if they conversed about household matters all the time. "Make

arrangements with Mrs. Carston and Cook in the morning.”

It would be too much to expect a “please” to precede that statement.

“Mrs. Carston...?”

“Housekeeper. No, I suppose you don’t know her. Mrs. Smith passed away two years ago.”

Eleanor nodded, still not capable of saying much, still afraid to dwell for even a second on the fact that Octavius had joined her without a loaded pistol pointed at his back.

She concentrated on her dinner as he continued.

“I want the Robsons treated with respect and deference. Expenses are not to be spared in preparation for tomorrow’s dinner, or any entertainment involving them.”

Ah. Another one of Octavius’s money-making schemes. Although, she did detect a hint of respect for the Robsons in his voice.

After another sip of wine, Eleanor took a bite of capon and spared a surreptitious glance at her husband.

With difficulty she swallowed past the laughter bubbling up her throat. A monstrous centerpiece occupied the middle of the table, obscuring her view of Octavius, so what she did see was his thick crown of hair adorned by two fern leaves, making him look like a green-eared bunny.

A giggle slipped out, which begat another giggle, which dissolved into laughter.

Short-lived laughter.

Her husband’s head snapped up, and he shot her a look of loathing. “I have not said anything to amuse, Eleanor.”

“I’m not laughing *at* you.” Well, she had been. Not in a mean-spirited way, but still. No one liked to be laughed at, least of all someone as serious as Octavius.

She sobered and explained, “I’m sorry. The flower arrangement is so ridiculously large, I can barely see you.”

He muttered something, shaking his head. Then he rose, tossed his napkin on the table and mumbled again. This time, she understood.

“I can’t do this.”

He was gone before she even blinked.



LEX BOLTED FROM THE dining room as if one of those legendary black-furred, red-eyed hounds from Hell were after him. He even locked the study door after he'd gained its sanctuary.

He could not do this.

Why had he ever thought he could play at domesticity? He might have done, if he'd married one of those meek, never-look-you-in-the-eye girls who were cowed with a glare, but he'd not been wise enough to do that. Nor had he been judicious enough to remain unmarried, which had been his goal since the age of twelve.

He sank into the fireside chair and wrenched off the cravat he'd so recently re-tied. Was this deal with Robson worth the torment of living with Eleanor? Could he send her back without any repercussions? Lex blew out a breath. Above all, he must ruin the Drummonds, as the Drummond family had ruined first his family and second his marriage. In order to keep Mr. Robson happy, Mrs. Robson *must* be entertained. So it all came back to...

Eleanor.

Her proud nose, so clearly out of joint, and sharply thrown words had compelled him to join her. He might have endured the entire dinner if she hadn't laughed. Discussing household affairs, his expectations for Eleanor and her wardrobe—he *must* still address that issue—fell within his capabilities if not his preferences.

Her laughter, though, so sweet and airy, did not bode well for his future. A man could lose his bearing in such a tune, could forget his purpose and become mired in tranquil domesticity, as he had done in the first months of their marriage. Until calamity struck, catching him unaware.

Well, he would not be caught again. He would not carry on the legacy of his father. Thus—Lex grabbed the poker and stabbed at the fire, inciting the flames—he lived a solitary life, a life devoid of anyone with a familial connection. No mother, no sister, no wife. No children.

Except, he did have a wife, thanks to his rashness. She was now living here at his insistence. And there was the boy who slept in the nursery, the one who wanted to be introduced to his parent, though he'd referred to Lex as "the earl."

Lex's gaze strayed to the ceiling. What a damned coil.

One he'd only begun to wade through.

So, he had a wife, and he needed her. Despite that inconvenience, he could not let her get the upper hand. *She* owed

him.

He must begin as he meant to go on.



ELEANOR RETURNED TO her chamber to find a travel-weary Henry there, curled up in the large bed, fast asleep. Tomorrow she would see if a maid could be spared to help his nurse ready the nursery. Considering the necessary preparations for the evening's entertainment—the Robsons?—she might have to ask Beth, her own maid, to assist instead.

As the servant now removed her gown, Eleanor tried not to dwell on dinner...to no avail. When would she learn not to have expectations? She wasn't twenty years old anymore.

At twenty it was acceptable, if not wise, to expect a fairy tale romance when an earl walked into the shabby home you shared with your parents and offered marriage. A girl of that age *would* expect her husband to dine with her on occasion.

Eleanor should now know better.

I can't do this.

Octavius had said that once before—after he'd accused her of adultery. She'd tried to defend herself, tried to ask why he thought she'd done such a thing, but he'd refused to listen. Instead, he'd ordered her removed to Mayne Castle forthwith and taken himself off to his club. With child and having suffered weeks of miserable living—a true shock after the mildly pleasant start to their marriage—she had complied with great alacrity. A letter a week later assured her that her infant child would remain in her care and that her husband would not darken her doorstep. Ever.

Octavius had certainly kept that promise.

Eleanor being Eleanor, she hadn't let the matter of her child's paternity fade quietly away. She'd written Octavius a dozen letters in the months leading up to Henry's birth. At first, she'd protested her innocence. Then she'd demanded to know who had supposedly fathered the babe. Finally she'd begged Octavius to tell her his suspicions. Not one of those letters was answered.

Beth finished unlacing Eleanor's stays and disappeared into the dressing room. Eleanor, more than warm enough in her shift, sat before the dressing table. One thing she would say for Octavius, he was always more than generous in supplying life's luxuries. Rooms, whether here or at Mayne Castle, were always kept warm, larders

were filled with the highest quality foodstuffs, and the substantial pin money she received every quarter day never failed to overwhelm her.

She'd gained a life of luxury and of freedom from her reproachful mother and spendthrift father. Marriage to the Earl of Lexden was a dream come true—as long as she didn't actually have to live with him.

She jerked the pins from her hair and began to brush out the long strands. She'd been content in Essex, and Octavius was obviously not delighted to have her back in London, so why had he demanded she come? If he simply needed a hostess, his poor, lonely sister would have been a much better choice.

But, no. Sweet Portia continued to rusticate in Somerset, more wretched than ever. Eleanor had met the young lady only twice, when she, aged a daring sixteen, had paid a visit without her brother's permission to Mayne Castle after the birth of Henry. Octavius's subsequent wrath had meant his sister never again strayed away from her home, but she and Eleanor, both in need of a human bond, maintained a friendly correspondence, and two years ago Eleanor had made the trip to Somerset to visit her sister-in-law and the two of them spent a joyful five days together.

Eleanor sighed and stared at her reflection. Was she really better off for having made a Faustian bargain in marrying Octavius? Her soul was certainly lost, but at least she'd escaped her family and had Henry. Henry made anything and everything worthwhile.

She rose, wanting to see her boy again, but the soft click of a door opening stopped her cold.

Octavius filled the doorway connecting her chamber with his, and a shiver scudded along her spine. She noted with dismay that it was not induced by fear.

He moved into the room with a grace that belied his austere personality. An unbuttoned emerald banyan flapped about his pantaloons-covered legs and revealed that he wore no shirt beneath, and her breath hitched. In the next instant she silently cursed herself. She should not desire his touch. Why couldn't her body understand that?

"Eleanor."

The coldness in his voice should have stemmed any rising passion. But, no, his effect on her was the same as ever. Her eyes took in his ruffled hair, firm chin and stark cheekbones, and her

blood raced.

Her rational side searched for an offensive remark, anything that would force him to leave so she could retain her dignity.

“Thank you for joining me for dinner.”

Egad. She had just handed him her dignity on a platter. He’d spent five minutes with her in the dining room before leaving in a huff, and she was *thanking* him?

His eyes widened. Then, before she could memorize that look-that-was-not-a-scowl, his features shifted into their customary expression. “We must discuss your wardrobe.”

Eleanor glanced down at her shift and wanted to run into the dressing room. Even she could see her nipples jutting against the thin cotton.

Octavius stepped toward her, his pupils large and fixed upon her bosom. Thrilling frissons shot along her nerves, and she shuffled backwards out of self-preservation.

“The gown you wore tonight was at least three years old,” he continued, his accusing tone in contrast to the fire emanating from his dark gaze.

“I live in the country,” she reminded him. *Alone*, she didn’t say. No one cared what she wore. She saved her best gowns for churchgoing and the rare social occasion. With such little use, they always looked new, though she would admit they weren’t fashionable.

Octavius advanced again, and Eleanor was distracted by the flash of skin revealed by the loose collar of his banyan. Near her thigh, her fingers flexed, itching and aching to touch.

Thoroughly annoyed with herself, she slid back another few feet.

He followed, bringing his musky scent within range. “What have you done with your pin money over the years if you haven’t spent it on clothing?”

Why couldn’t that bilious voice dispel her lustful haze? She tried to look away from her husband’s hot eyes but wound up staring at his lips instead. Yes, they were drawn into a tight line, but she knew what they could do. To her. He might seem cold and lifeless, but Octavius could kiss like the most passionate hero of a Minerva Press novel. Those lips alone had driven her into frenzied desire again and again during the early weeks of their marriage. And what followed after...? Eleanor flushed with the scorching memory of their lovemaking.

She pinched her thigh hard enough to make herself wince. *There*. Now, what had he asked? Pin money. Initially she'd saved it, fearful that someday Octavius might cut her and Henry off. Unfortunately, her mother's entreaties for financial assistance had become more pronounced and more frequent after Eleanor was banished, and to stop the begging and earn a little peace Eleanor eventually passed on the majority of her pin money on to her mother.

Her name cracked from her husband's lips, a sharp report. "*Eleanor*."

An apology rose in her throat, but she gulped it down. She'd done nothing wrong, and she owed him no true explanation. "Living so far outside Society, I didn't feel the need to dress myself in the first stare of fashion, so I economized." She thrust her shoulders back. "I will repay you if you wish."

"It's yours. I don't want it back."

He sounded offended.

Surely, though, that was too human an emotion for Octavius, god of brooding unreasonableness that he was. Eleanor stepped backward again, fighting with all her will to deny the urges coursing through her. Her backside bumped into the footboard of the bed, but that barely registered.

As if drawn by a leading string, Octavius moved with her until a mere whisper of air separated their charged bodies. She wished, oh how she wished, she could have prevented her strumpet's body from leaning into him. But she could not prevent it. This—physically reuniting with Octavius—had been the stuff of her shameful daydreams of the past six years.

As she pressed herself into the sinful solidness of him, his hand slithered up to claim the back of her neck, pulling her closer and closer to his lips. His breath fanned over her chin, and she let her eyelids fall shut.

Finally.

"Mama?"

Octavius leapt away from her as if she had the plague, leaving Eleanor to hang awkwardly in the air, fighting for balance. She managed to right herself and twisted to see Henry peering around the bed curtains, blinking sleepily at his parents.

In between harsh breaths, Octavius spat out, "Eleanor, explain."

She pushed aside the curtain and sat beside her son, smiling

down at him. "Everything is all right, sweet. I'm sorry if our talking woke you."

He tried to look around her at his father, but Eleanor tucked her child firmly beneath the bed linens; the devil only knew what epithet Octavius might spew next time. She leaned over and kissed her son on the forehead. "Back to sleep, my boy. You've had a long day."

With a snap, she closed the damask bed curtain. Then Eleanor moved toward Octavius. Henry's interruption, like a dousing of cold water, had cooled her ardor. She lowered her voice as she faced her husband's glower. "The nursery wasn't ready for him."

"Because you were not supposed to bring him."

Well, she supposed, she'd set herself up for that retort. "It is only for one night."

"It had better be," he bit out. "He is supposed to remain in the nursery."

Unfazed, Eleanor found her gaze sliding toward the door that led to Octavius's bedchamber. Her ardor had cooled but not been killed. She hated herself anew in that moment.

Apparently, so did Octavius. His lip curled in distaste before he spun on his bare heel and stalked out of the room.



Chapter Three



T_{ap-tap.}

Lex glared at the solid oak separating him from the obscene domestic world outside his study. Bickley would never disturb him in the hour after breakfast.

Tap-tap.

There the noise was again. It must be Eleanor. A picture of her—eyes eager, cheeks flushed, nipples taut—flashed before him. Against his better judgment, he bade her enter.

The person who slipped through the door was a good deal smaller than his wife, and Lex had even less desire to see him. “Good morning, my lord.”

“What the devil do *you* want?” He probably shouldn’t have spoken so harshly, but the sight of the small boy dressed in a smart blue skeleton suit thoroughly addled his brain.

Unabashed, the child planted himself in front of the desk. “To introduce myself.” He executed a perfect gentlemanly bow and said, “I am Henry Nonus Rupert Mayne, sir.”

“Bloody hell, she didn’t,” Lex mumbled. He stared at the boy, feeling as if his eyes were spinning in their sockets.

He remembered Eleanor writing to him upon the child’s birth. *I have delivered you a healthy son and heir, on August the twelfth. What shall I call him?* Blinded by rage and betrayal, Lex hadn’t cared one whit. But he’d always hated his name, his father’s attempt at being clever and naming the future eighth earl Octavius. He’d written back: *Anything but Octavius.*

So she had named the boy Nonus. The ninth.

Nonus, for God’s sake.

A rough bark of laughter escaped him.

The child smiled in response. His brown eyes were bright and

cheery—and maybe a tad wary.

“What do you prefer to be called?” Lex asked, unsure of what else to say.

The boy chewed his lower lip. “Henry. But Mama says I must become accustomed to Corby, as that’s how it’s done when you’re an earl’s son.”

That constricted feeling enveloped Lex again, as if he’d fallen from his horse and had the wind knocked out of him. He would *not* be calling this little bastard Henry, Corby, or anything else.

“You are supposed to remain in the nursery. Did your mother tell you to come down here?” Eleanor *would* encourage her son to ingratiate himself.

“No, sir. She didn’t.” The boy tugged at the coat of his suit, as if it were uncomfortable. “The nursery’s being aired and I wanted to meet you because you’re my father—”

“Get out!”

Lex hadn’t meant to yell the words, but his voice boomed across the study, echoing off the walls. The boy’s eyes widened a fraction, but he only shrugged and said, “Mama did say you would be too busy. I’m sorry for interrupting.”

The door flew open. “Henry! What on earth are you doing here?”

Despite her words, Eleanor looked a silent accusation at Lex, as if he’d been thrashing the child. He was clearly going to pay, every minute of every day, for bringing her to London. He wanted the Mayne Arsenal to succeed; he wanted the British Army to turn to him for its rifles; he wanted the Drummond family’s finances in ruin. But the effort was going to bleed him dry.

He moved to the open doorway, calling for a footman, and Richard scurried into the room.

“Return the child to the nursery,” Lex told him, directing a pointed stare at Eleanor. *Where he is supposed to remain.*

He swung the door shut after the two as they left.

“You—” Eleanor began.

“There is nothing for you to say. I told you how matters would stand.”

She glared at him with a fierceness that undoubtedly came from suppressing the wish to call him several undesirable names, so he folded his arms across his chest in an authoritative air.

“I began discussing your wardrobe last night,” he said. He had

been barely able to concentrate on the subject with her breasts exposed to his gaze. Today they were hidden beneath an old lace fichu, but he remembered how tantalizing they'd looked—

How pathetic was he to lust after the wife who had cuckolded him? Was this another sign of the insanity coursing through his veins?

Eleanor tilted her head in inquiry but apparently decided to say nothing until it was required of her.

Lex uncrossed his arms and rolled his shoulders. *Finish this business.* “You need a gown for this evening. It will have to be something that is already finished. Take Richard and your maid. There won't be time to order more, but arrange for the seamstress to visit the house in the next day or so.”

“I am in the midst of setting the nursery to rights—for our son—and arranging dinner for this evening.”

Lex locked his muscles against the inevitable flinch the words *our son* brought on. “The staff will follow your instructions while you are gone.”

She thrust her shoulders back, which did nothing to diminish his disgusting lust. “I don't need a gown.”

Would she ever heed him straightaway? “You do.”

“Why?” Her eyes blazed a darker shade of green. “So that you may put me on display for your friends?” She swept out her arms and posed as if she were holding a Grecian urn. “Look at the wife I've bought, Mr. Robson. Lovely, isn't she? Of course, my hasty marriage to her was the biggest mistake of my life. The vows had barely been said when she began to seduce some mysterious gentleman.”

At her mocking but accurate words, Lex took an unsteady step backwards. He never should have married her. But he'd been twenty-three years old and his stiff yard and inherited recklessness had muddled his brain to an extraordinary degree.

“Why am I here, Octavius?” She dropped her arms and her sarcastic tone, now sounding flat and weary. “You don't want me here, nor do I want to be here.”

She was right. But the past was neither here nor there. What mattered was Robson. “To help me entertain. As I mentioned, Mr. Robson and his wife have recently arrived from America, and I would like to further my acquaintance with them. For that, I need a hostess.”

Her eyes narrowed. "Is this another of your business deals? Goodness, Octavius, how much money does one man need?"

"You, of all people, should be able to answer that," he fired back. "Would you rather I sat idly by and spent it all on this, that and the other, until I was as deeply in debt as your father?"

A fine sheen of moisture welled up in her eyes, and a masculine voice from the distant past whispered inside his head, *Be mindful what you say, son. Words can strike as sharply as stones.*

Lex closed his eyes against her pain and his. Whatever faults her father might possess, Eleanor wasn't foolish with money. She'd saved her pin money, for God's sake. Had she striven, as fiercely as Lex had, to be the opposite of what her father was, to ensure she didn't fall prey to his biggest fault?

He heard a sniff and felt the air stir. He opened his eyes to find Eleanor already in motion. "I will see about that gown."

She swished past him, still clinging to those tears, refusing to let them fall, as defiant as ever.

Lex turned, wrapped his hand around her upper arm, and spun her back toward him. Before he could reason with himself, he bent his head and pressed his lips to hers. His irrationality twisted darkly with six years of sexual frustration, and he spared nothing, savagely attacking her plump lips, reaching a hand behind her head and pulling her tight against him. He willed her to stiffen and resist, to be the rational one...

But no. Eleanor could never hold herself back, be it with her words or her passion. Her body eased and loosened as if a dam had opened. Indeed, her eyes were closed but those tears had finally escaped and were racing down her cheeks...

Stopping Lex cold. Pulling him back from the brink.

His words had driven her to cry.

His head swam. He felt off-kilter.

Next thing he knew, he abandoned her mouth and captured each tear in a soft kiss. The salty flavor seemed to turn his blood to treacle. His heartbeat slowed. He released her head, moving his hand to her ear as he slid his mouth back to her lips, and with gentle coaxing she opened to him, allowing him to taste her tea-with-honey flavor.

She moaned when his tongue touched hers, a tiny sound that made even his toes tingle. He kept his lust in check this time, kissing her slowly, stroking her earlobe with his thumb. Could a kiss

serve as an apology? It was all he could offer for his previous hurtful words.

She slid her hands up his chest, her fingers tangling in the folds of his cravat, but abruptly she froze. Wrenching her mouth away, she cried, "I can't do this."

After a moment's fumbling more, she was out the door.

She couldn't do this? Neither of them could handle the marital state. That much had been proven six years ago.

Lex dragged in breath after breath and returned to his desk, willing himself back to the rational world. His letter to the War Office lay there, waiting to be finished.

He picked up his quill and began to write, ignoring the faint taste of honey upon his tongue.



HIS CONCENTRATION WAS sporadic at best over the next hour, as he alternated between damning himself for still desiring his faithless wife and for being haunted by the hurt in Eleanor's eyes. He had barely written three lines when a commotion arose in the entrance hall outside. He would have paid the disturbance no heed, except he distinctly heard a little boy's indignant voice. The same little boy who'd disrupted him earlier.

Lex could solve this problem. The coach could be ready for travel to Essex in under an hour. But if he sent the child away, he'd have no leverage with which to make Eleanor play the dutiful, happy wife before the Robsons.

He stormed out to the chaotic hall. Eleanor, crouched down, skirts dragging across the marble, seemed to be pleading with her child, who was shaking his head so vehemently Lex thought he would surely induce a headache. Richard the footman stood off to one side, whispering to, or perhaps flirting with, Eleanor's maid, while Bickley held the front door open, looking as if he wished to not only usher them all through it, but on to perdition as well.

No one paid any attention to Lex.

That didn't stop him from saying, "Close the door, Bickley. Such behavior need not be displayed for all of Mayfair."

That condemnation brought Eleanor fully erect, her mouth set in such a harsh line Lex could not believe he'd been plundering it a short while ago.

"What is the problem?" he asked, his patience greatly

diminished by all the other interruptions this morning.

"I don't want to go shopping, sir! I want to play with my soldiers."

Lex shifted his gaze to the boy and just managed to repress a reaction to the dark scowl on that miniature face. Lord, did he ever remember the tedium of shopping.

"You aren't going shopping," he declared. He glowered at Eleanor as if she were the recalcitrant child. "He is to remain in the nursery. Must I repeat myself *ad nauseam*?"

"He can't," she replied through thinned lips. "The nursery is being cleaned by his nurse and an upstairs maid. I have been told by you to bring Beth"—she nodded at her maid—"with me. Everyone else is preparing for this evening. There is no one to care for him."

So that might be, but Lex could also see wariness flitting through her eyes. She didn't want to be separated from the child. She didn't want Lex to have the opportunity to...to what? Send the boy off to Essex without warning? Sell him to the nearest chimneysweep as a climbing boy?

Well, Eleanor wasn't the only one who could be contrary.

"I will take charge of him," Lex announced, flicking a glance at Bickley, who, despite a flash of shock, willingly opened the door once again.

Eleanor gawked. "But... That's not necess—"

"Don't worry," Lex said darkly, herding her out onto the top step. "We'll begin with refreshments in the kitchen." He turned and nodded at the boy. "Come."

The boy obeyed, and he and Lex set off toward the back corridor, the little scoundrel smilingly pleased with himself for escaping the shopping trip. Lex couldn't blame him for feeling so satisfied, of course; he himself was feeling much the same, if for different reasons.

He looked over his shoulder to find Eleanor still standing in the doorway, looking for all the world as if she feared he intended to make a feast of the boy. Though she had not known Lex's father, she couldn't have made it more clear that she saw the same erratic madness running through him that had plagued his sire. With a growl, Lex turned away.

As they descended to the kitchen, the boy looked over his shoulder. "Thank you, sir."

Lex mumbled something vague and herded him into the steamy kitchen where the clashing, chopping, and chattering assaulted their ears...but only briefly, for his appearance belowstairs sucked every last decibel of sound from the room. One girl stood before a gnarled table, her knife frozen in mid-air above an onion. Another maid seemed to have ceased breathing.

Lex searched out Cook, who hastily lowered the pot she'd been holding and gave a clumsy curtsy. The other girls bobbed up and down in unison and then resumed their tasks at Cook's sharp glance.

"Have you a treat for...?" Lex glanced down at the small boy, still uncomfortable calling him by any sort of familiar name. However, it was best not to make a fuss before the staff. "Have you a treat for Colonel Henry? He's in need of sustenance before he wages a fierce battle with his toy soldiers."

God. Where had that twaddle come from? There must be a sensible medium between making a fuss and making a fool of oneself.

No one else seemed perturbed by his comment. Henry giggled. One of the maids smiled shyly. Cook beamed, her plump and rosy cheeks dimpling, looking as happy and heartening as someone in her post should. She reminded Lex of the cook who'd been employed when he was younger and he'd sought comfort and sugarplums in the kitchen.

"Certainly I do, my lord. Jenny, bring out that seedcake. Cut a slice for both their lordships," she instructed, clearly familiar with Lex's taste for sweets.

However, Lex wanted out of the kitchen. Away from the boy. It was all fine and good to vex Eleanor, but he had no intention of actually spending time with the child. Cook could keep him occupied with food for a while, and then he could play with his soldiers. Yet, before Lex could extricate himself, Jenny had plopped two generous slices of iced seedcake on the old table, Henry was seated on the bench, and everyone in the hot, close room was looking at Lex expectantly.

He sat down across from the boy, which meant he had to look at that brown hair and those dark eyes. Eyes twinkling in further satisfaction.

Lex stifled the urge to scowl, mindful of his wider audience. He ate in silence, which couldn't have seemed as unsociable as it was,

because the boy, between mouthfuls of cake, babbled incessantly.

“I mean to fight the Battle of Talavera today, although I’m not certain which regiment came down the hill with General Wellesley,” he said, his earnestness almost enough to make Lex forget himself and smile. “It might have been the Forty-Eighth Foot, but I can’t remember and Mama hasn’t had a chance to find out for me. Do you know, sir?”

“No.” Lex busied himself with finishing his cake, which had indeed hit the right spot.

“Well, p’raps once I have the other regiments positioned I can work it out for myself.” Henry tilted his head and pinned Lex with a questioning look. “Sir, do you know General Wellesley? He’s a lord now, like you.”

The hero worship in the boy’s eyes fairly lit up the dim room. Maybe Lex should remind him Wellesley had only won a few battles, not saved the country or sent Napoleon scurrying. “He and I are not acquainted. As you seem to be aware, he’s been rather occupied of late.”

The child nodded, though his mouth turned down in disappointment. He swiveled toward Cook. “May I please have some milk?”

“Oh, laddie, there isn’t any fresh.” Cook shot Lex a wary look, as if she thought she might be fired for not attending to his heir’s every desire.

Lex rose and grasped the opportunity. “Send one of the maids out for some. The colonel may wait here until she returns. I must return to my work.” He attempted an agreeable expression and nodded to each of the women before escaping up the stairs without a backward glance.

Once more secluded in his study, he pulled his letter to the War Office in front of him. He could delay no longer. If he didn’t submit his request soon, the Mayne Arsenal might lose out on supplying the British Army. Then he wouldn’t be able to sink the rifle manufacturer in which William Drummond’s father had invested his last shilling. Yet, Lex smirked. That arsenal didn’t have Elliot Robson or the American’s expertise.

Unfortunately, the words wouldn’t leave his pen, and Lex found himself drawing out a piece of vellum and picking up a pencil. He was so lost in his reverie that the now familiar *tap-tap* on the door didn’t register right away.

He stared at the door, weary resignation settling onto his shoulders. He'd got himself into this situation; there was no one else to blame, though Eleanor always made a nice target. But he was the one who had spoken up.

Stuffing the vellum and pencil in a drawer, he called, "Enter."

The boy marched in with a tin full of soldiers, a mustache of milk arching across his upper lip. "Ready to fight, sir?"

"I am presently occupied. You will have to play elsewhere."

The corners of the boy's lips drooped, as did the white mustache. "But you are in charge of me. How can you super...super...look after me if we aren't together?"

Lord, the child had learned to spread the guilt as thickly as his mother.

Lex rose, refusing to look at those doleful brown eyes. He pushed a leather wing chair closer to the fire and then hoisted the marquetry table out of the way. Motioning to the now vacant corner he said, "You may play here. I, however, still have work to do."

He returned to his desk as the boy dutifully took up his position in the corner, a mysterious smile playing about his lips, which looked rather ghoulish with that white mustache painted above them.

"Come here," Lex ordered. When the boy drew close, Lex whipped out his handkerchief and scrubbed the milk off. "I highly doubt General Wellesley tolerates such slovenliness in his army."

For the love of heaven, why couldn't he just speak like the adult he was?

The boy's small forehead wrinkled in consternation. "What's sloven...slovenishness?"

"Slovenliness. After slovenly, which means 'unclean, disheveled, unkempt.' It means you need to learn to clean yourself after you eat."

He'd meant that last as an admonishment, but the boy straightened his spine and saluted, smiling. "Yes, sir!"

Damn, but the child had an unflappable personality. Lex's gruffness never ruffled a single one of his feathers. Which, Lex supposed, just further proved that he wasn't a Mayne at all.

He turned back to his desk, once again feeling as if a hundred bricks pressed down upon his chest. Damn Eleanor to hell and back. Yes, he *would* blame her. If she'd left the child in Essex as he had

commanded...

The boy returned to his corner, spilling out all his soldiers. Able to breathe once more, Lex dipped his quill and began to work on his letter. Luckily, the words now came more easily.

Lord Palmerston,

With war raging apace on the Continent, and the colonies—

“Sir, why haven’t you joined General Wellesley’s army?”

“I am an earl,” Lex ground out.

—and the colonies pressing matters in the Atlantic, England’s—

“So?” The jackanapes didn’t bother to look up, but continued setting his soldiers aright.

“I have responsibilities here in England.” Lex’s words didn’t sound very intelligible through gritted teeth.

—England’s need for an efficient and economical supply of—

“What responsibilities?” The boy’s soldiers were beginning to form neat rows and columns under their industrious and intrusive leader.

“I have estates and tenants that need looking after. I must visit them frequently.” Why was he explaining himself to this whelp? Lex dipped his quill again, ready to explode at the next interruption.

“You never visit Mayne Castle, so that must not be one of your responsibilities.”

A well-placed thrust. Lex closed his eyes as guilt worked its way through his veins. He’d spent his childhood at Mayne Castle. It had been his father’s favorite of their three estates. Lex hadn’t been there in seventeen years.

He opened his eyes and loosened his death grip on the quill. Thank God for capable stewards. But not for inquisitive little bast—

“Earls do not go to war,” he forced himself to say. That wasn’t a whole truth, but it was offered with enough finality that the conversation—or rather, inquisition—should be at an end.

“But—”

“Enough!” It seemed the martial genius before him would recite at least three titled gentlemen who *had* bought commissions in the army, so Lex hardened his tone. “I will have silence, or I will remove you from this room.”

For once, the boy’s brown gaze turned wary. Then he turned his back on Lex, concentrating on his soldiers. A low mutter reached Lex’s ears, something that sounded like, “You give commands just like an officer.”

Lex did not believe it was meant as a compliment.

In the relative silence that ensued, he dashed off the rest of his letter. After signing his name, Lex paused and glanced over to the corner where the Battle of Talavera was unfolding. He returned quill to paper and added a postscript, having no idea if Palmerston would know the answer to his question, but surely someone at the War Office would. Then, before he could rethink the question, he folded the paper and dropped sealing wax on it.

Now, for even more peace. "Colonel, would you like to go the park?"

The child leaped up and bounced from foot to foot. "Oh, yes!"

Lex crossed to the door, calling for a footman. When Joseph appeared, he said, "Take the child to the park for a few hours."

Neither servant nor boy looked as if they found this plan satisfactory. However, Lex thought it brilliant. Once Bickley had shown them out, Lex returned to his study and savored the first quiet moment of his day.



Chapter Four



Eleanor wandered around the sitting room, eyeing its decor with despair. She had never liked this room, even though it was the designated space for “family” use. Two chairs flanked the fireplace, both with minimal cushioning and green fabric so faded she wasn’t even certain it was green. A wooden settle occupied pride of place in front of the white-trimmed mantel, but it had no cushions at all, faded, thin, or otherwise. There were a few small tables backed against the walls, but no other places to sit. And the walls—their garish yellow color either induced a headache or, if one had recently eaten, nausea.

She couldn’t imagine spending a cozy evening here with Henry. However, Octavius had asked her to meet before their guests arrived. No doubt he wanted to inspect her newly purchased dress and bark out instructions for her behavior.

Sighing, she went to examine the artwork above one of the tables. Thank goodness Henry seemed none-the-worse-for-wear for a morning spent in his father’s company. Although, she doubted they had spent much time together. Her son claimed to have played with his toy soldiers in Octavius’s study, but when she arrived back at the house he and a footman had just returned from an outing to the park, and the high and mighty Lord Lexden had left to meet Mr. Robson. Leave it to Octavius to wheedle his way out of such an onerous commitment as becoming acquainted with the son he’d just met. In all honesty, though, Eleanor was relieved the two of them had spent little time together. Octavius could not be trusted to hold his viper’s tongue.

As usual, he kept her waiting. Everything would be on his terms—or so he thought. She would wait only three minutes more.

She straightened one of the framed pieces on the wall she had

been staring at vacantly. The grouping consisted of seven small frames jumbled together. Not one of the paintings coordinated with another. Each was painted in a different style, the colors were entirely too discordant, and the subjects themselves were so varied—one pastoral, one portrait, two still-lives and so on—she couldn't make sense as to why they had been hung in close proximity. Not only that—Eleanor leaned closer—one wasn't even a painting! It was a small sketch, albeit a framed one, of a man and a child sitting by a river and fishing.

How odd.

She turned away, calculating it would take her ten seconds to reach the door, which was all the time remaining to Octavius. A smile crept over her lips as she crossed the room: Assertiveness suited her. Would that she'd only discovered this skill earlier in life. If she hadn't let her mother treat her like a rug, perhaps she wouldn't have ended up in this disastrous marriage. Perhaps she might, even now, be wed to a clergyman or some such, a loving and kind man who would read to their children every night and—

The door flew open. Eleanor struggled to regain her balance after being nearly knocked over. Octavius caught her elbow, but she turned away, putting the necessary distance between them. Already she fought to calm her breathing after the merest whiff of his cologne. Did the man add an aphrodisiac to the bottle, or was his elemental scent alone her undoing?

"Eleanor." Her name always sounded ugly and bitter from his lips.

She feigned a smile, for such an expression *must* irritate a person unwilling to form one, and spun in a circle, showing off her gown. "Do you approve?"

He stared at her, face like stone.

Well, at least he won't have to worry about wrinkles in his older years.

Eleanor bit her lower lip to suppress a chuckle; Octavius's gravity always seemed to bring out the absurd in her.

As the silence dragged on, she smoothed out her skirts. She'd thought the bottle-green slip-dress with a netted overlay looked striking with her light brown hair and hazel eyes. Not to mention the gown had been meant for the Duchess of Burnham, who, according to the modiste, adored it but thought her coloring didn't do it justice. How could Octavius doubt the taste of a duchess?

Finally, *finally*, his jaw twitched. "You look...enchanted."

Her breath caught and her gaze flew to his. There it was, that miniscule softening, that speck of humanity.

Her knees shook. No! For her own safety, she could not acknowledge it. So she swept to the opposite side of the room and said, "What can you tell me of...Mr. Robson, was it?"

Octavius cleared his throat. "Robson was superintendent of an arsenal in America. I am consulting him on ways to improve the efficiency of rifle-making here in England. At the moment, our methods are rather haphazard." He spared her a glance. "Suffice it to say I want to make a good impression on him. I will do whatever it takes to keep Mr. Robson happy, and I expect you to do the same."

"I hope you aren't asking anything unseemly of me, Octavius." The statement would irk him, and she added his given name to double his annoyance.

Her husband's stone features reverted to the usual scowl. "Do not be vulgar, Eleanor. All I ask is that you behave in a manner commensurate with your position."

Though she'd brought them upon herself, Octavius's words stung. Naturally, she fought back. "If you wanted a lady wife, you should have married one."

"I didn't want a wife at all," he retorted, color slashing his cheeks.

Of course not. That's why he'd paid her father's debts and asked to marry her. However much he might regret the marriage now, the Earl of Lexden had chosen her. But, why?

His hand slashed through the air. "For God's sake, just act like a countess! And a happily married one at that. Befriend Mrs. Robson. Entertain her while I conduct business with her husband." He pinned her with a glare, his eyes hardened into pebbles. "Or the boy will be taken from your custody."

The threat wasn't new, but it still spiked fear in her heart. Moreover, her throat closed at one particular part of Octavius's speech. Somehow, she squeezed out the question, "Did you just tell me that I am to play at being a 'happily married' countess?"

"I did." In any other person, she might have thought that was amusement lightening his eyes.

She drew herself up to her full five and a half feet. "I do not believe even the great Sarah Siddons could pull off the role of *your*

happy wife.”

Octavius shook his head. “For God’s sake, just keep your sharp tongue sheathed, Eleanor.”

A sharp knock forestalled Eleanor’s reply. Bickley opened the door but did not enter. “The carriage just pulled up, my lord.”

Octavius swept a hand toward the door. “We must await them in the drawing room.”

Eleanor attempted to sail past him with her dignity intact. The effort was in vain. Her husband timed his next words so only she heard. “I think I will enjoy seeing you attempt to play the happy wife.”

She nearly tripped over the threshold.

The bile rising in her throat nearly choked her, but thoughts of Henry growing up in this cold, wretched house spurred her to swallow it and move into the drawing room with as much grace as her shaking limbs would allow. Octavius followed, too closely, which only served to agitate her nerves further.

She sat on the velvet-cushioned sofa and drew in a few deep breaths. Arranging her skirts gave her hands something to do and allowed her to ignore her dratted husband, which was why, as three pairs of footsteps approached the door, she was unprepared when Octavius dropped onto the sofa next to her. His hulking body crowded hers, igniting unwanted but wanton thrills. She couldn’t even renew her calming breaths for fear that doing so would intoxicate her traitorous senses with his scent.

Eleanor wanted to drop her head into her hands and melt into the floor.

Instead, she envisioned Henry and pasted a false smile on her face.

Bickley ushered an older couple into the room. Octavius rose and, by dint of a hand at her elbow of which she was all too aware, helped Eleanor stand rather more steadily than she might have on her own.

“Good evening.” Her husband placed his large hand on Eleanor’s back and pressed her forward. Lord, she wished he would keep his hands off her. “Eleanor, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Robson?”

Why, if he wanted her to act like a countess, didn’t he introduce her with her proper title of Lady Lexden?

Mr. Robson, trim and silver-haired, bowed and squeezed his wife’s arm. “How do you do?”

“It is lovely to meet you, my lady,” Mrs. Robson said with a curtsy. Her voice was gentle, almost lyrical. She turned to Octavius and broke into a wide smile. “I cannot express my joy at finally meeting you, Lord Lexden. I am honored to be welcomed into your home.”

This profound greeting unbalanced Eleanor, who could not fathom why someone would be so eager to meet her husband. Perhaps Mrs. Robson was one of those Americans who found herself in awe of the British aristocracy. Eleanor hoped not, for she knew she couldn’t live up to such expectations.

Octavius’s reply to Mrs. Robson’s effusiveness was a stiff, “The pleasure is all mine, ma’am,” which seemed to equate pleasure with torture.

Mr. Robson stepped forward and clasped Eleanor’s hands with an enthusiasm to rival his wife’s. “My dear, I have anticipated meeting you ever since my conversation with Lex the day before yesterday.”

Eleanor froze. What could Octavius have possibly said? She breathed again, realizing he couldn’t have said anything detrimental about her. That would hardly suit his purpose. But why should Mr. Robson or his wife care what kind of marriage Octavius had?

She must say something; her limited social experiences in Essex had taught her that much. “I am pleased to meet you both.”

Eleanor guessed Mrs. Robson must be over fifty, but the woman’s glossy brown hair showed only the slightest traces of grey. Her figure was well-proportioned, her dress a stylish blue taffeta, and when she tilted her head just so and smiled Eleanor thought the safest place in the world might be within her embrace.

She gave herself a shake. Octavius’s touch was affecting her more than she would like to think. She had no need of a hug, especially from a stranger.

“Shall we sit?” she offered.

The Robsons moved as one and sat on the sofa. Eleanor slid into a chair, leaving Octavius to fend for himself. He chose the chair opposite her and flashed her a brief glare of annoyance. She ignored him.

And waited. And waited.

Having expected him to begin the conversation, she glanced at Octavius, but he looked entirely uncomfortable. Ill-at-ease even.

And the Robsons were obviously waiting, too.

Though she owed him nothing, Eleanor plunged in. "I hope you are finding London an agreeable place to visit. Is this your first time here?"

"It is," Mrs. Robson said. "I must admit the city is a bit overwhelming. It's large and noisy, yet so fascinating. I intend to enjoy as much of it as I can."

"Eleanor would be delighted to take you round," Octavius interjected unctuously. "Shopping, driving in the park, anything you desire."

Eleanor desired to offer her own services, but she tamped down her oppressed feelings and smiled silently at Mrs. Robson.

The woman's husband turned. "I hear you yourself are recently arrived in London, Lady Lexden."

A bubble of dread swelled in Eleanor's stomach. The man's blue eyes were alight with intelligence. The American would not be easily fooled by the playacting of her and her husband. Is that why Octavius's next words sounded more desperate than stern?

"Please, call her Eleanor."

Mr. Robson sent her husband a sharp glance, and the bubble of dread expanded in Eleanor's stomach. She'd never wanted to be an actress, but...*Henry*.

"Yes, please do," she said. "My husband knows how much I dislike standing upon formality." She chuckled aloud, even while she seethed on the inside. What could possibly cause Octavius to quake at using her proper address? Certainly she didn't deserve the title, but he'd married her, so now he must deal with the consequences.

She continued babbling. "Yes, Mr. Robson, my son and I have indeed just arrived from Essex. The Season is well underway, of course."

There, that sounded like something a countess would say.

"Your son is here? Oh, bless you, he must be feeling so much better in order to have traveled," Mrs. Robson exclaimed. "I never could abide it when my little ones were ill."

What on earth? Henry had rarely ever been ill. Somehow Eleanor kept her confusion hidden—she hoped—but she couldn't resist looking to Octavius, who appeared more flummoxed than she'd ever dared imagine he could.

He shifted in his chair. "The boy is doing remarkably well of

late, and both Eleanor and I are delighted he could accompany her to London.”

Was it her imagination, or was Octavius gnashing his teeth? He'd been right; this could be fun! “Henry is, after all, his father's pride and joy,” she gushed.

He wanted to skewer her with his glare, she felt it, but there was nothing he could do in front of their audience. He managed a nod, but nothing resembling pride or joy appeared on his face.

Mrs. Robson leaned forward. “I hope we will be privileged enough to meet the young man, his health permitting. It's been ages since our children were little. Elliot, do you remember when Hannah hid in the sideboard during our dinner with the governor?”

Eleanor nearly collapsed against the back of her chair in relief. Finally, a safe topic: the Robsons' own family. She opened her mouth to enquire further, but Bickley opened the door and announced dinner.

Octavius was quick to stand and offer his arm to Mrs. Robson. That lady's husband did the same to Eleanor, and she gladly accepted.

As they walked down the corridor he commented, “You've an interesting husband, my dear.”

The remark was said casually, but Eleanor could see the older man thinking, speculating. The bubble of dread grew larger inside her, and she wondered how she could possibly eat a bite of dinner.



LEX AND ROBSON ROSE, both of them watching the ladies exit the dining room. Lex hid his relief at their departure. What an excruciating affair. He hadn't found the slightest thing amusing, as he'd boasted to Eleanor he might. Before dinner she had figured out how to turn the tables on him and verbally offered painful thrust after painful thrust, mostly regarding the boy. He had meant to tell her the story he'd concocted regarding their absence from London, but she had distracted him with that alluring dress. And her abrasive tongue.

He and Robson reclined once more and Bickley supplied them with port.

The American took a swallow. “Excellent. I've always enjoyed this custom where the ladies remove themselves so that we may talk about them and they take advantage of our absence as well.”

He tipped his glass, swirling the liquor. "I wonder if my dear Justine will tell me what Eleanor has to say about you."

"Gossiping is not the point!" Beneath the table, Lex flexed his fingers, trying to rein in his temper, blocking out all the hateful things Eleanor might say. "This is our opportunity to speak of topics inappropriate for the ears of gently-bred ladies. Hunting, shooting, business, politics. They, in turn, shall speak of things that interest them and not us."

"Ah, I see now." Robson lowered those silver eyebrows which had been inching up toward his hairline, and Lex knew he'd been teased again. "By all means, then, let us speak of politics. How do you think Lord Liverpool will get on as prime minister now that poor Mr. Percival has been assassinated? Was he your choice for the position?"

Robson was supposed to have chosen business, not politics. Of course, they had spoken of nothing but rifles, arsenals, and manufacturing all afternoon. Resignedly, Lex knew his place as host. He wouldn't, however, be able to carry this topic very far.

"I had no opinion on the matter."

"Oh, come now. Don't tell me there weren't whispers running rampant around the House of Lords. What was the scuttlebutt on the Marquess of Wellesley and Liverpool?"

Lex stared at his glass, avoiding Robson's gaze, which was merely inquiring. Nevertheless, he felt like a schoolboy who'd not done his Latin declensions. "I've never taken my seat," he mumbled.

The corners of Robson's mouth turned down. "Why not? You've held the title for over seventeen years."

Lex heard the unspoken censure in the older man's tone. And once again that baritone from his past echoed inside his head: *The title is not privilege; it is responsibility*. It was joined by another voice, sharper and littler: *You never visit Mayne Castle, so it must not be one of your responsibilities*.

The ruby liquid in his glass swam before his eyes. Driven mad by a ghost, an urchin and an American—that's what his entrance report to Bedlam would note. Then there would be one final remark before the title passed to the brat: *Pushed beyond all reason by a harridan of a wife*.

An ignominious end. Even more disgraceful than the seventh earl's death, since the true nature of that event had been kept secret. Still, Society would only shake their collective head and

wonder if the Mayne insanity ran through the boy's blood too.

"Ah, thank goodness your lip twitched," Robson said softly. "I was beginning to fear I'd bored you to death."

Lex scrubbed a hand over his face. "Of course you haven't bored me, sir. I—"

"No, that wasn't boredom," Robson acknowledged. "It was more like despair. Have I opened an old wound, lad?"

Robson's direct gaze and honest assessment nearly tore Lex's chest open. Nearly. The sobriquet "lad" had served as a breastplate of steel, deflecting the urge to spill out every last detail of his life. There was no proper way to explain that he'd not taken his seat in Parliament because he didn't want his peers questioning his every speech and vote, wondering if he was as unstable as his father.

"No, of course not," he told Robson. "I'm simply more interested in trade than in politics. But what of you? You so willingly agreed to help me, and therefore England. Did loyalty to your country not give you pause? Especially considering that, when you sailed from America, the chance of war seemed high."

Robson tipped his head back and studied the ceiling for a moment. "Loyalty is complicated, don't you think? I fought in the War for Independence and consider myself an American through and through. Yet, my own father was born here in England, so family ties remain." He redirected his gaze to Lex. "Then, too, there are other bonds that demand my loyalty. When you saved Andrew, you saved me from once again being a father drowning in grief. I owe you, you asked me come, and so here I am."

And here too was Lex, accepting Robson's loyalty and using it to further his revenge against the Drummonds. He did not deserve any commendation.

Robson raised his glass. "To the beginning of our friendship, and a fortification of that loyalty. May our countries be friends."

Lex could do nothing but raise his glass as well. "To friendship."

The dining room—which easily sat sixteen—was beginning to feel like a closet. So, which was the lesser of two evils, to be here with Robson or in the drawing room with Eleanor? Perhaps she could turn things around. Both Mr. and Mrs. Robson had seemed charmed by her at dinner. When his wife put away her shrewish tongue, she was unquestionably engaging.

He downed the last of his port and stood. "Shall we rejoin the ladies?"

Robson grinned. "Ah now, our gentle ladies. Yes, by all means let's rejoin them. Their loyalty is another thing altogether. What would we do without them?"



"THIS IS LOVELY," MRS. Robson exclaimed of the décor as she and Eleanor returned to the drawing room after dinner.

"Yes, I believe the former countess was fond of entertaining." At least, that was the image of Octavius's mother Eleanor had gleaned from the passing remarks of servants. Octavius had never spoken of her, so Eleanor wasn't quite certain when she had passed away, but the drawing room's appointments had so far stood the test of time. This chamber was more comfortable than the sitting room, with cream-colored velvet sofas, gilded and cushioned armchairs, and inlaid tables all tastefully arranged against the backdrop of walls covered in a glossy, celestial blue paper.

"And what about you?" Mrs. Robson asked, arranging herself on the sofa in a practiced, genteel way that Eleanor envied. "Will you entertain now that you are returned to London?"

If Eleanor hosted a ball, would anyone come? In those early, agreeable months of their marriage she and Octavius had attended a few events. It had become clear to her, however, that he wasn't comfortable in a social setting and she'd been left to flounder on her own. Then, in the blink of an eye, she'd been banished from London. Members of the *ton* probably wouldn't even recognize the Countess of Lexden if she rode through the park. But Octavius wanted her to please Mrs. Robson, whose brandy-colored eyes glowed at the prospect of London society.

She sat next to the American and smiled. "I would love to throw a ball in your honor, Mrs. Robson."

"Oh, my dear, I didn't mean—"

Eleanor leaned over and patted Mrs. Robson's hand. "I insist. And so will Octavius."

After his apoplexy. Actually, the more she thought on it, the more amusing she found the idea of playing the perfect wife and hostess for him. Her behavior might drive him insane, which would be the ideal revenge for his unwarranted accusations against her honor and his ill treatment of her.

She focused on her guest once more. "What better way to introduce you and Mr. Robson?"

“We do love to dance. We held parties regularly at our home in Baltimore. Have you a ballroom here?”

“Nooo...” Eleanor drew the word out. What had she got herself into?

Mrs. Robson stood and flitted from one corner to another. “This room is good-sized. Does it open to any others?”

“Yes. All the rooms on this floor are connected.”

She looked at Mrs. Robson hopefully, and that lady beamed. “Perfect. All you need do is push the furniture back and open all the doors. Voila! A ballroom.”

Everything Eleanor knew about planning a ball could fit in her fist. Fortune, or Octavius, seemed to have provided her the guide she needed. She preferred to thank Fortune.

“Mrs. Robson, I know it seems rather rude to ask, since you will be the guest of honor, but would you help me plan the ball?”

“First, you must call me Justine.” The older woman advanced toward Eleanor. “Second, you must stop acting as if you are indebted to Mr. Robson and me. We are the ones who owe much gratitude to your gracious and valiant husband.”

Eleanor always thought so poorly of Octavius—and why shouldn’t she?—that it shocked her to hear someone else speak highly of him. It was like hearing the devil described as kindness itself.

“I didn’t realize you and your husband had a prior acquaintance with Octavius.”

The least the man could do, if he wanted her to play the loving wife, was inform her of all relevant details.

Mrs. Robson waved a hand through the air. “Oh, we’ve only just met Lord Lexden. However, we have corresponded for years.” She tilted her head. “Surely he’s told you how he saved our son’s life?”



Chapter Five



Octavius, her arrogant, demanding, vituperative husband, had saved someone's life? Eleanor would have sooner imagined he'd driven a man—or woman—to despair.

This time, she let Mrs. Robson see her surprise. "I had no idea. Octavius can be quite private at times."

Mrs. Robson smiled in much the same way Eleanor did when speaking of Henry. "I do admire modesty in a man, but I would not deny Lord Lexden the right to shout his bravery from the rooftops. And to think he was himself hurt in the saving of my Andrew..."

Eleanor realized she was frowning and relaxed her features. She could not reconcile this image of her husband. She knew nothing of this paragon Mrs. Robson spoke of.

No, that wasn't true. She had once thought the Earl of Lexden the most heroic of men. But she'd been mistaken. She gave herself a little shake. *Much* mistaken.

Linking arms with Mrs. Robson, she led the woman back to the sofa. "Tell me about your son."

They had no sooner sat down when the gentlemen reentered the drawing room. Eleanor scrutinized Octavius, looking for signs of this mysterious, intrepid hero Mrs. Robson described. She didn't see it. His mouth was drawn into a grim slash, and his eyes looked querulous. Considering his gaze had settled upon her, though, what did she expect? She and Octavius never seemed to do anything but quarrel. *Well...* Her cheeks grew hot in remembrance of the one other thing they did well besides argue. But that had been in the early days of their marriage.

Mr. Robson hurried to his wife's side and kissed her hand as if they'd been parted for days instead of a mere half hour. The enthusiasm was endearing. Of course, Octavius would not find it so

Eleanor grinned to herself. She flew to her husband's side and clung to his arm, gazing up at him with what she hoped were adoring eyes. Recalling her twenty-year-old self helped. Being this near to him did not.

"It seems the ladies missed us nearly as much as we missed them," Mr. Robson said.

"Indeed," Octavius replied. His jaw had tightened even further while Eleanor continued to hang on his arm.

If he would just relax, he would be handsome. His features were perfectly symmetrical, his face more square than round, his skin more craggy than smooth, and his lips... A soft sigh escaped just thinking about the tender—unbelievable as it was, yes, *tender*—way he had kissed her that morning.

Octavius cleared his throat. "What deviltry have you ladies been up to in our absence?"

He probably meant to say that in a lighthearted manner, as befitting his role of a supposedly "normal" husband, but to Eleanor's ears it sounded like an accusation. She chuckled, in case the others also thought he sounded harsh. "We've been planning a ball, dearest."

The endearment couldn't hurt, could it?

"A ball? Here at Lexden House?" Octavius escorted her to the chair she had occupied earlier and then stood behind it. He failed at keeping the dismay out of his voice.

"Yes, in honor of the Robsons. We always meant to entertain and make our mark in Society, but with dear Henry taken so ill..." Did Eleanor have to carry this whole farce? She shook her head and tried not to make eye contact with the Robsons. Lies piled upon lies. Who could live like this?

"A ball sounds capital."

Eleanor wanted to giggle again. If there was anyone less suited to use the word "capital" than Octavius, she could not think who it would be. Instead, she recalled a detail from the conversation at dinner and turned to Mrs. Robson to save the hour. "Would you play the piano for us, ma'am?"

The woman played three sets, her dutiful husband turning the pages for her. She played well. The notes were lively and robust, striking a desire to dance, but Eleanor took one look at her tight-lipped husband and the urge passed. She wished he would sit,

preferably across the room. Her nerves were strained enough.

As if reading her mind—and willfully ignoring three-fourths of it—he finally sat, propping himself on the arm of her chair, his black pantaloons-covered thigh overwhelming her vision.

“That was wonderful,” Eleanor told Mrs. Robson as the older couple returned to the sofa. “I envy you your skill. I wish I had learned to play an instrument.” That wasn’t a lie. But with the way her father spent money and ran up debts, an instrument in the Dryden house probably would have been sold a mere week after its purchase.

The others began to discuss various musical compositions and their suitability for the upcoming ball. Eleanor was content to listen. The night couldn’t go on much longer. Soon this debacle would end, and Octavius would remove his thigh—and his scent—from her sphere.

Mrs. Robson sighed upon hearing the name of the composer Boccherini. “He is one of my favorites. I was attending a musicale where a quintet was playing his minuet when I spied Mr. Robson in the second row. Listening to the music, looking at his handsome profile, imagining, in that way young girls do, what our married life would be like... I was half in love before we were ever introduced.”

Interested, Eleanor turned to Mr. Robson. “And what was your impression of your future wife at that point, sir?”

To her surprise, his cheeks flushed a deep red. “I am afraid my thoughts were most untoward. You see, upon introduction to the family, I fancied Justine’s younger sister.”

Octavius must have looked as shocked as Eleanor, but Mrs. Robson verified the claim. “It’s true. He thought the sun rose and set on Edwina. She was and is a beautiful woman. I was disappointed when I saw the direction of his interest.” She paused and lifted an eyebrow. “Well, no, I was a young woman, so I was *anguished*.”

Eleanor liked Mrs. Robson more and more.

“Go on,” Mr. Robson urged, “tell them how you changed the course of my affection.”

Beside her, Octavius shifted, bumping Eleanor’s shoulder. She straightened and inched away. If they could just keep the Robsons talking, they might survive the evening.

“Well,” the woman said, “my sister knows she’s beautiful. She flirted, danced, and walked with the intention of securing the favor

of as many gentlemen as she could. Elliot"—she patted her husband's hand—"was quite overwhelmed by the swarm around her. He decided the best way to garner her attention was to find out more about her. What her favorite flower was, the dance she most enjoyed... And so he came to me for that information."

Mr. Robson grinned. "I thought my strategy was brilliant, and in the end it was, though not to the purpose I had in mind. In planning my courtship of her sister and gathering intelligence from Justine, I soon discovered *she* was the love of my life."

"Despite that debacle, we are happy now." Justine Robson clasped her hands and stretched her arms out. "I only remind him once a year what a disastrous mistake he almost made."

Eleanor smiled. The Robsons were delightful. The couple's only fault lay in how their marriage pointed to everything that was wrong with hers.

"Once we married," Mr. Robson was saying, "we've hardly separated. I don't know how the two of you made do without each other for so long." He smiled, but his gaze remained sharp.

Oh, those blue eyes were shrewd, Eleanor noted. The American was not completely taken by their acting. Small wonder, considering their poor performances.

"Living apart was not easy," Octavius replied, to Eleanor's surprise. "But we did what had to be done and are that much stronger for it."

A pretty enough speech, if he hadn't sounded as if he were speaking of taking a dose of ipecac.

"To be sure, marriage is difficult enough without all the extra trials and tribulations thrown in." Mrs. Robson squeezed her husband's hand. "You must have had a solid foundation upon which to build, much as we did. If I may be so bold, how did you meet? I cannot resist a good romantic tale."

Eleanor closed her eyes, hoping that would serve as a proper *romantic* reaction. The silence of the room buzzed in her ears. She could feel the tension snapping across Octavius's nerves. Not even for Henry would she make up this kind of mawkish tale of twaddle.

She sighed, releasing herself from the burden. "Octavius, I love the way you tell it."

Beside her, he stiffened. She peeked at his face. Panic was etched in every line. But she wasn't going to save him this time. He could reap what he'd sown.

The Robsons waited; she with wide eyes, he with a raised silver eyebrow.

“Our—” Octavius cleared his throat after nearly choking on the first word. “Our beginning was inauspicious.”

Eleanor flicked him another glance. *Our beginning* was almost poetic.

“I was walking down the street when I noticed a young lady in distress. She’d dropped quite a number of papers, which were blowing about in the wind.”

Bills due. IOUs. Demands for payment.

Her father’s debts.

“I helped her gather them up.”

Mrs. Robson smiled encouragingly.

Octavius slid his hand up and down his thigh. Finally he stopped, gripping the wool-covered muscle in a fierce clench. Eleanor examined his large hand. Three freckles dotted the back, his knuckles were deeply grooved, and his fingers were trembling—trembling, despite how desperately he tried to stop them.

“When I handed the papers back, I realized I was looking at the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.”

How had he made that sentence sound sincere?

“I had to know her name, however inappropriate it would be, so I introduced myself. Her mother approached at that moment and, fortunately for me, did not stand on ceremony. She made herself and her daughter Eleanor known to me.”

Indeed, her mother had suffered no trouble discerning how plump a man’s pockets were and adjusting her standards accordingly. It had been a most irregular introduction, but then, without any funds for a proper Season, there was no chance of Mrs. Dryden’s daughter meeting a gentleman of means except in an irregular way.

Mrs. Robson sighed. “Oh, do go on. This is lovely.”

Her encouragement had the opposite effect. Octavius’s fingers shook even more violently. He dug them farther into his thigh and licked his lips but said nothing else.

Eleanor was not going to speak for him. She was not going to recount how he’d paid a few token calls on her, all of which were dominated by her mother’s ingratiating conversation. How that very same parent had left them scandalously alone on more than one occasion and commanded Eleanor to take advantage of the situation

to force the earl's hand. How, in the end, Eleanor had begun to have second thoughts about her one and only suitor, but her feelings had not mattered because Octavius presumptuously paid off her father's debts, forcing *her* hand.

No. She would not speak.

However...

His social unease had always tugged at her compassion. She slid her hand over his, tucking her fingers between his thumb and index finger. The trembling stopped—from the shock of her brashness undoubtedly.

Shock didn't begin to describe what she was feeling. Why had she done something so, so *nice*? Yes, generally she was a kind person, or so she liked to think, but never in regards to Octavius. Not anymore. She had no reason to be. None, his frayed nerves be damned.

He spoke again: "As her father was indisposed, I received Eleanor's mother's permission to court her. I did so quietly, out of respect for her father. Those are some of my favorite memories, just the two of us walking through the park or visiting the Tower of London."

Green Park, not fashionable Hyde Park. God forbid the *ton* take note of the woman he was consorting with. That was Eleanor's cynical view of the past. She had to admit, however, that at the time she had loved every minute of her private hours with the Earl of Lexden. He'd been reserved, yes, but he'd listened when she spoke and asked questions as if he were interested. In short, he'd given Eleanor his full attention and, in the beginning, nothing could have made her admire him more.

How pathetic.

Octavius was staring at their conjoined hands. "As each day passed, I knew with ever more certainty I must have Eleanor in my life."

She looked up at him. Truly, he sounded as if he *meant* those words. His jaw had slackened and the lines around his eyes relaxed. He couldn't have turned into such a grand thespian in mere minutes. Why, truly, had he married her? Nothing had surprised her more than his proposal. Later she would try to get the truth out of him—about their marriage and about the Robsons' son. It would no doubt be as difficult as uprooting a hundred-year-old oak, for Octavius guarded his thoughts and feelings as if to share them was

to give them away forever. But Eleanor would try.

“She agreed to marry me and we’ve lived happily ever after since.” His shoulders fell at least an inch. He clasped the hand that lay over his and lifted it to his lips. “Thank you.”

His soft kiss lingered longer than she expected. He even made eye contact, and she knew he was thanking her for her efforts, for her support.

Her stomach flipped. She resisted the urge to yank her hand away.

She looked to the Robsons. The man seemed surprised but smiled kindly. Mrs. Robson—Justine—gushed for some minutes about the tale. Noticeably, she lost steam at the end, and Eleanor remembered their recent long journey, and she thanked God as the woman announced they now would be taking their leave.

The gentlemen allowed the ladies to precede them down the stairs. In the hall, Eleanor realized she must pull Justine aside to make plans for the coming days.



SAD TO ADMIT, BUT LEX’S knees had nearly buckled with relief when Mrs. Robson said she and her husband were leaving. He’d let Eleanor’s hand slip from his and followed the others downstairs.

Eleanor and Mrs. Robson stood in the shadowed corner of the hall, speaking earnestly. Well. Whatever else could be said of the evening, Eleanor *had* been charming. And she’d displayed damn fine acting skills. And she’d offered him support... If Lex didn’t watch himself, he was going to be beholden to his wife despite their lack of true affection. He stilled a shudder.

“Shall we meet again in the morning?” Robson asked as he pulled on his gloves. “I can begin drawing up a plan for the best way to situate the machinery.”

For once the American was focused on business. A good sign. Lex quickly agreed to the meeting just as the ladies ended their conversation.

“Thank you, my dear,” Mrs. Robson was saying to Eleanor. “I look forward to seeing you again.” She stopped in front of Lex and patted his arm. He steeled himself not to pull away. “I am so honored to have finally met you, my lord.”

“Please, call me Lex.”

“He’s a bit fixated on that nickname, Justine,” Robson said, with

a sly wink in Lex's direction. "You'd best indulge him."

"I would be delighted to—and relieved as well," the older lady said. "I will admit to being concerned about the formality of England before our arrival here. And on the way over in the carriage. But in the drawing room... Well, my anxieties have been eased by the pair of you. I find it so endearing that you address each other by your Christian names."

Lex tried to smile at her, for he did like Mrs. Robson, but he feared the effect was more that of a grimace. He would have to work on that.

The Robsons said goodnight, and Bickley showed them outside to the Lexden carriage, a secondary conveyance which Lex had given over to their use for the duration of their visit.

The front door clicked shut, and Lex blew out a heavy breath. As the night's tension drained away, his muscles ached from being clenched so tightly.

He turned to Eleanor. "I think that went well."

Her piercing look slew whatever ebullience he'd begun to feel. "Goodnight then." She whirled and marched back up the stairs.

Some people could not accept a compliment.

He followed her, unnaturally pleased to catch a glimpse of her slim, stockinged ankle with every other step. "What were you and Mrs. Robson speaking of just now?"

She had reached the first floor. Without stopping or looking back at him, she said, "Nothing you need worry about."

"Eleanor."

She reached the second staircase and spun around to face him. "Enough," she snarled.

What was she so angry about? "You've only just met her. What secrets can you possibly be sharing?"

Good God, Mrs. Robson hadn't been telling tales about his rescue of Andrew, had she?

"You are as tiresome as a prying old woman," Eleanor snapped. "If you must know, I invited her to tea tomorrow."

She'd stopped outside her bedchamber, slightly breathless from the climb. For a moment Lex was distracted by the rapid rise of her breasts. However, he managed to lift his gaze before saying, "How kind of you."

"Occasionally, I *am* kind," she retorted. Further proof she could not appreciate a compliment, as he had not imbued his words with

any sarcasm.

However, after the strain of pretending for the Robsons, he didn't have the wherewithal to make a cutting retort. Besides, for some unthinkable reason, Eleanor had offered *him* her compassion in the drawing room.

He reached out for that satin-soft hand which had empowered him just a short time ago. "Yes, occasionally you are immeasurably kind."

He never got to touch her. Her hand flew up, index finger pointing at his chest, and her hazel eyes clouded over to a dark brown.

"*Don't* talk like that," she admonished. Then she disappeared into her room. The door latched shut before he even lowered his wayward hand.

At least her ungracious behavior absolved him of ever again spouting pretty words in her direction. And she thought *he* was boorish?

He headed for his bedchamber. With the help of his valet, he was soon stripped down to his pantaloons and shirt and wrapped in his favorite green banyan. Lex then bid the servant goodnight and threw open the door connected to Eleanor's room, intending to speak to her about the wisdom of hosting a ball. She wasn't immediately visible, but the dressing room door stood ajar and from within came the sounds of rustling fabric—and a sigh, presumably, provocatively, at the removal of stays.

Lex stoked the flames in Eleanor's fireplace and waited, his heartbeat steady and his breathing rhythmic. He was calm now. He hadn't been calm for days. Not since Andrew Robson convinced him he must send for Eleanor. So, what had changed?

He was still saddled with a child that wasn't his and a wife who contradicted his every word. His peaceful, family-free existence had been splintered and consumed by a fire not unlike the flames prancing in the hearth. And yet, since Eleanor had covered his hand with hers, his anger and irritability had...

Not disappeared. Not hardly. But it had gone from a raging heat to a warm breeze. The memories of their first meeting hadn't been as painful as he expected. Eleanor *had* been pretty back then, alluring even. No. Who was he lying to? She was still beautiful. He wanted her just as much now as he had then, only now that desire was an ugly, demeaning contagion that further proved how mad he

was. What kind of man lusted after a wife who cuckolded him? Only an incredibly demented one.

He stabbed the fire once more and replaced the poker. Eleanor's low voice drifted out from the dressing room, while another sound, small and unintelligible, arose from the bed. Lex strode over and pulled back the bed-hanging.

"Eleanor!" His heart beat erratically. He sucked in a breath then exploded. "Hell and damnation, woman, I told you one night only."

From behind him, his wife brushed past in a flurry of pure white lawn and stared at the bed, which was occupied by a troublesome boy who'd begun to stir.

"He's supposed to be in the nursery," she said.

"You're bloody right, he is!"

She turned and poked Lex in the chest. "Watch your language, sir, and stop yelling. You'll wake him."

The chest-poking did not have the same soothing effect as the hand-covering. Lex lowered his voice anyway; no need to wake the whole household. "If he is awake, he can march back up to the nursery where he belongs."

The child wasn't awake though. Amidst their violent whispering, he'd curled up on his side and fallen fast asleep again.

Eleanor bent over the bed and struggled to take up the boy. His limbs dangled. "I will carry him upstairs," she whispered, "but do *not* think I will welcome your presence in this room when—"

"Oh, for St. Bartholomew's sake! You'll only hurt yourself and probably the little bastard too." Lex hefted the child from her arms, almost ripping the boy's small nightshirt in the process.

"Don't use that word!" His wife's hazel eyes blurred beneath a sudden well of tears. "How could you have ever thought—? How can you continue to think—?" She dashed the wetness away with her hands and sniffed. "You are the biggest lackwit in London if you cannot see the resemblance between yourself and your son."

Lex squeezed his eyes shut. He was no lackwit.



Chapter Six



He turned away, still holding the boy, unable to keep the pain from his expression, and put one foot in front of the other, eyes open now but blind to where he was going. The child nestled into Lex's chest, and Lex willed his arms to remain still. But something else, something more powerful, forced him to pull the boy closer.

His...son. Even his mind tripped over saying that. Lex stared down at the child's soft cheek and slack mouth. The eyes were closed, but they were the same deep shade of brown as his own, Lex remembered. The boy's hair was the same color, too. God, even that scowl he'd pulled this morning mirrored one Lex caught on his own face every now and then.

Henry *was* his. Worse, Lex had known it since the boy arrived in London.

The truth was too agonizing to acknowledge. He'd meant it when he told Eleanor on their wedding day that he did not want any children, not even an heir. Since before his birth, denial of the child's parentage had been the only option, horror of the cuckolding aside. Anything else would have crippled Lex. Which meant he was a coward through and through.

Henry smacked his lips and lifted his eyelids, a feat that seemed to take great strength. "Sir? Where are"—he yawned—"we?"

Lex looked around. They were in his bedchamber. He opened his mouth to answer, but the boy was almost asleep again. Out of expediency, he placed him in the bed and pulled the satin coverlet over him. The child—his child—nodded off once more.

Lex wanted to run. He wanted to hide. He wanted to drink himself stupid, except he rarely drank. How much more of an idiot could he become? He'd never wanted to marry or father a child. He had done both within a matter of months. Now, after putting his

wife and child aside for years, he'd taken them back into his home.

Eleanor was right. He was a lackwit. More than that, he was as deranged as his father had been.

She was standing in the doorway between their rooms. He couldn't see her, but he sensed her presence. No doubt she was protecting Henry, still afraid to leave Lex alone with him. And perhaps she was correct, given his birthright.

His chest tightened as he stared down at Henry, that suffocating feeling returning with a vengeance. He couldn't be a father. He didn't have it in him any more than his own father had. But it wasn't too late. Just because he had a son didn't mean he needed to be a father. The child was safer without him, as Eleanor surely knew. And just because Henry was his son didn't mean Eleanor hadn't betrayed him. After all, Lex knew for certain women weren't always faithful to their husbands. His mother had proved the point by bedding Robert Drummond. Eleanor had put the exclamation to it by succumbing to the charms of Robert's son William.

So, there was only one option. After this brief, torturous interlude, Lex would go back to his solitary life, with no wife and no son to live in fear of his outbursts or to look upon him with pity as he followed in his father's footsteps.

Bolstered, he turned and strode back toward Eleanor's room, but her eyes brought him up short. Why did she have to look so vulnerable at the most inopportune times? Lex knew well enough Eleanor could stand on her own two feet, could protect herself and her son with a fierceness to be envied. So why did she sometimes look as if she needed him?

She pushed away from the jamb and filled the doorway, rigid and formidable. His absurd thought had obviously been just that. She didn't need him at all.

"I told you I did not want you to return to my room," she said as he neared.

"I'm not going to sleep in here with *him*," Lex replied.

Eleanor crossed her arms over her chest. "Why didn't you take him up to the nursery?"

Because he hadn't been able to think straight with...his son in his arms. "I just didn't. And I'm not going to move him again. He's been disturbed enough." *And so have I.* "I will sleep in your bed."

Eleanor bristled. "Then I will sleep in your bed with Henry."

"No, you won't." Lex moved toward her, crowding her, until she

voluntarily backed into her room, apparently afraid he would touch her. Hopefully not afraid he would hurt her. “We will both sleep in your bed. But rest assured I have no intentions of doing anything but sleeping. It’s been a trying day.”

She said nothing, just stared at him, so he closed the door quietly and ambled over to the bed, stripping off his banyan as he went. After laying it across the counterpane, he blew out the bedside candle. Finally, he pulled his shirt loose from the waistband of his pantaloons and climbed between the bed linens, pretending as if he fully expected Eleanor to do as he said when he knew perfectly well she would march into his room and sleep with Henry.

Lex closed his eyes and listened for the click of the door latch.

Eleanor stood in the semi-darkness, shaking with anger and confusion. Oh, how she wanted to go home to Essex. Instead she was stuck in London, an unwilling actress in a farcical production with a beast who acted human for the briefest periods of time.

She could hear Octavius getting comfortable behind the bed hangings. He likely expected her to go sleep with Henry, even if he voiced the opposite expectation. Sometimes he was so easy to understand, and sometimes he simply baffled her. Such as when he’d called her kind.

Well, there was no reason to submit to Octavius’s expectations at this point. He was in her room; he could suffer her presence. Never mind that she’d have to suffer his too, as his discomfort would more than offset that.

She extinguished the last candle and climbed into bed. Once the heavy damask curtains were drawn, it was too dark to see her hand in front of her face—which was good. She had no desire to see her husband. He hadn’t moved since she lay down. Even his breathing seemed to have ceased. She didn’t care. She closed her eyes and sought sleep.

Instead, she found chaotic snatches of memory: Octavius looking upon his son with disdain yesterday afternoon. Henry claiming to have played in his father’s study. Octavius complimenting her gown. Justine’s praise for her husband. Mr. Robson’s suspicious eyes.

“Octavius.”

He started but recovered himself quickly, his “Yes?” spoken through gritted teeth.

“How did you save the Robsons’ son?”

“They mentioned that?”

“Justine did. She thinks you are brave and honorable.”

“It was nothing like that.”

Eleanor fought annoyance. “Do not affect modesty. It’s entirely unbelievable. Tell me what happened. I’ve a hard enough time playing this damnable role when you put no effort into your part. I need as much information as possible, including a description of Henry’s ‘illness,’ but that can wait for another time.”

Silence.

They lay so close. His scent teased her nose, and the heat coming from his body made her want to throw off the bedclothes. And her nightdress. But she ruthlessly ignored her unruly, rising passions. “I’m waiting.”

He sighed. “Andrew Robson moved to London from America a couple of years ago. I had no acquaintance with him until...” He shifted, and his knee touched her leg ever so briefly. “You do realize the Robsons’ effusiveness is disproportionate to my actions? Andrew is their son and very important to them...”

Important to them? Eleanor’s eyes stung. How could Octavius not see that Henry deserved the same devotion as the Robson boy? From *both* of his parents. So she remained quiet, hoping her husband’s own words would sink in and torture him.

His voice was husky when he spoke again. “One night I left my warehouse near Cheapside. It was rather late because there had been some problems. I was in my carriage, as was sensible at such a time and place. I happened to observe, however, another gentleman stumbling down the street. I would have continued on my way, but”—he sighed—“a gang of four or five ruffians set upon the gentleman, dragging him into a dark passage. I had the coachman stop. I retrieved the gentleman—Andrew Robson, as I’m sure you’ve guessed—and that is how I came to know the Robson family.”

Contrarily now, Eleanor wished she could see her husband’s face. Was he truly being modest? *Retrieved the gentleman* sounded so innocuous. So minimal. There must be more. Was Octavius hiding something?

“Did you take a weapon with you?” His answering groan was not enough. “Did you?”

“No.”

“Did the coachman assist?”

“No. I wanted him ready to leave at a moment’s notice.”

“Did you kill one of the ruffians?”

“Eleanor! I know you think the worst of me, but I am capable of showing restraint. A few well-placed punches took care of the matter, if you must know. And obviously you must.”

Eleanor ignored his offended tone. She was finding it much easier to converse with Octavius when she paid no mind to his attitude and extraneous comments.

“Justine said you were hurt. How? Where?”

“This happened two years ago. I am completely healed, though you might have wished me dead.”

She winced. “I am glad to hear of your recovery. Where and how were you injured? What if Justine asks me about your wound? Or scar? Is there a scar?”

“Are you certain your father was not a barrister?”

His remarks she could let pass, however she was having a difficult time ignoring his body. It was so large and warm. And close. He was mostly clothed, of course. She knew that, but her imagination didn’t. So she slipped her hands beneath her bottom to prevent them from acting on the absurd urge to find that scar of his.

When she didn’t reply, he continued. “One or more of them had knives. Both Andrew and I were cut. His was the more serious wound. The coachman and I brought him here, and I sent for a surgeon. Andrew convalesced with me for a good number of weeks, which is how I became better acquainted with him and began a correspondence with his father.” Another pause. “The cut I received was small in comparison, and I recovered quickly.”

She would like to find his story unbelievable. After all, how many gentlemen would leave the safety of their carriage to rescue a stranger? None she knew. Though, even if her situation had not been so dire as Andrew Robson’s, Octavius *had* stopped to help her all those years ago as well.

Argh. She was practically singing her husband’s praises. Where had her anger gone? He had called Henry all sorts of despicable names. He refused to acknowledge the child as his own. Privately, at least. He had never publicly doubted Henry’s parentage, or at least not to Eleanor’s knowledge.

No. There was no ground to give. Octavius thought she had betrayed him. That in itself was an unforgivable crime, and too bemused and heart-weary to say more, Eleanor flipped onto her side, facing away from her husband. She *would* sleep.

“Eleanor?” Octavius whispered.

So many minutes had passed, she’d assumed he had fallen asleep even if she hadn’t. She could pretend to be asleep, having learned much about pretense during the evening. However, his whisper was too intriguing to disregard. There was something in his tone she’d never heard before.

“Hmm?”

The bed linens shifted. “I’m sorry.”

Her breath caught. She dared not ask what he was sorry for, though. His answer would never measure up to the expectations in her heart.

Eyes open, she stared into the dark nothingness. Waiting. Not hoping.

She thought she heard him swallow.

“I apologize for my remarks regarding Henry...our son.”

Eleanor closed her eyes, spilling two teardrops down her cheeks. Was this a new beginning? Could they possibly take a different path from here? She didn’t know, but for now she would hug those words to herself. For the moment, they were enough.



Chapter Seven



When Eleanor awoke, the soft light of sunrise limned the edges of the bed curtains. She had slept well.

Rolling to her left side, she studied her sleeping husband, his breaths deep and near-to-snoring. In repose, he did look as handsome as she recalled. His mouth had lost that pinched ugliness, and with his eyes closed she couldn't see the bitterness lurking there. He had apologized with those lips. She hadn't seen the words leave his mouth, but she'd heard them all the more clearly because she hadn't been able to see anything. She would cling to the sweet sound of that "I'm sorry" and "our son," for as long as her memory allowed.

Her gaze wandered from his face. He'd thrown off the counterpane and the top bed linen. One arm stretched above his head, and his—oh, she never knew what to call his manly part—strained against his black breeches. Her cheeks heated and she looked away.

Despite instructions from her mother to be meek and biddable both in the marriage bed and outside of it, Eleanor had not much succeeded at either. From the very first night of their marriage, she had been unable to suppress the urge to be brazen in their sexual congress. When her husband expressed shock, she'd tried to moderate her actions, but the heat of the moment was over and over her undoing and he was left appalled again as they finished.

Now, however, Octavius slept, oblivious to her thoughts and stares. Oblivious to her desire for him.

Eleanor shook herself, once more attempting the modesty expected of a countess, avoiding any further glances at his breeches. His shirt was disarranged, revealing a fair amount of his abdomen and side, clearly defined muscles all around. She pressed her lips

together, realizing her thoughts would never achieve the high morality she strived for if she continued to ogle her husband. She should close her eyes.

Then she remembered their conversation from the night before. He'd been stabbed and yet never admitted the severity of the wound. Or its location.

Hmmm. Eleanor squinted, trying to focus in the minimal light. Was that a scar disappearing beneath the waistband of his breeches? Possibly. She inched closer. Maybe...?

Octavius moved, and Eleanor froze. Only after much shifting and a small sigh that shouldn't have been endearing but was irritatingly so, he settled back into sleep, his face turned away from her. Which she took as license for her to continue her search. There was no harm in looking for that infamous scar, after all.

His shirt had fallen back over the spot she was most curious about. With as much stealth as one could muster on a feather mattress, she slid closer and dipped her head, trying to peek underneath.

No luck.

His breathing was deep. When Henry slept like that, there was no waking him, so Eleanor reached out and ever so delicately clasped the linen fabric between her thumb and finger. Touching his shirt was not touching *him*, after all, so she pulled it up across his abdomen and then leaned over him, eyeing that stretch of firm skin. She only looked for a raised slash that might indicate scarring. She did *not* look at the bulge in his breeches, which, after all these minutes, was still there.

"What are you doing?"

If he had spoken in his usual sharp tone, she would have launched herself to the far side of the bed. Instead, his sleepy, bemused rasp sent a shiver scurrying down her spine, effectively paralyzing her. Then Eleanor peered up at her husband across the expanse of his white shirt. He'd raised his head, but his eyelids didn't seem quite so willing; they shaded his eyes in a way that sent that a shiver of delight right down to her core.

She was in trouble in more ways than one. But a brisk, honest reply would surely see her through.

"I was looking for your scar. I thought this might be it."

She slipped her finger beneath his waistband and rubbed the spot she suspected, and Octavius made a strange sound. She felt a

contour in the skin beneath her finger, but it didn't run in the direction she thought. Reversing course, she explored the area further. When he made that odd, gargling sound again, and shifted his hips from side to side, Eleanor stilled her finger and stared at his face. He'd closed his eyes and was holding himself completely rigid.

"Oh my," she whispered in utter amazement. "You're ticklish."

"Eleanor, don't you dare—"

She dared. Sitting up, she quickly set both hands to work, skimming over his sides and abdomen at lightning speed. His chuckles, spontaneous and thoroughly incongruous, came in a staccato beat that left him breathless. Eleanor did not relent as he squirmed beneath her fingers. She even giggled herself, caught up in the only carefree moment she had ever experienced with her husband.

Her assault came to an abrupt end. In one fluid move, he grasped her shoulders, tossed her back upon the mattress and pinned her there with his heavy body. Their gazes connected. Neither of them seemed to be breathing.

He lowered his head and claimed her lips. She did not resist. It had been six years for her, even if not for him. She accepted his weight, reveled in the way he pressed her into the mattress, was shamelessly delighted to feel how hard he was against her thigh. She shifted her leg slightly, applying pressure to his erection. He groaned into her mouth, and Eleanor took the opportunity to push her tongue between his lips, stroking and caressing as he'd once shown her.

Somewhere far, far away, she acknowledged that she'd failed to be docile again and must seem utterly desperate. But... *Six years.* She could not hold back. Octavius had apologized, and he was at last willing to touch her again. A new beginning indeed.

He levered himself up an inch or two, breaking their kiss, and Eleanor just stifled a whimper of distress. He came back and kissed her hard. Once. Twice. Then he slid to her side, propping himself on his elbow, breathing hard. His left hand fumbled with the ribbons at the neckline of her nightgown.

Impatient, she reached up and undid them herself. She would not have hesitated to pull his head to her breast either, but he beat her to it, yanking the nightgown down first. When he drew her nipple between his lips, unadulterated desire shot through to her core, leaving her wet and beyond ready.

But, they couldn't do this too quickly. Who knew when they would stop arguing long enough to do it again?

She tried to rein herself in, but it was nearly impossible as Octavius cupped a hand beneath her breast and suckled desperately, as if he hadn't touched a woman's body in years. Whoever his mistress was, she should be ashamed.

Too soon he withdrew, leaving her nipple wet and tingling. Eleanor wound her fingers into his thick hair and guided him to her other, untouched breast. He lavished the same attention on that one, driving her to buck her hips off the bed. He pressed her back down with the heel of his hand. She took a deep breath, trying to relax, only to be undone when his wicked hand snuck beneath her nightgown and covered her mound. His lips found hers again just as his finger slipped inside her.

Eleanor's moans echoed in her head, trapped in the back of her throat as he pressed and teased until she was on the edge of insanity, ready to explode. She tore her mouth away and gasped out, "Stop! I'm going to—"

Slashing at his hand to get him to heed her, she reached for the fall of his breeches, using action instead of incoherent words. She wanted him inside her. Their marriage might be a sham, but at least they could do this one thing right and reach their peak together.

Somehow, with a frustrated groan on her part and two curses on his, they unbuttoned him. Eleanor took the large, rigid length of him in her hand. Octavius hissed out a breath. She stroked him a few times, wanting to do more, but her blood was afire again. She let go, and he stripped off his breeches and his shirt.

With Octavius naked, hard, and slightly off-balance, Eleanor took advantage and gave in to a wild whim. She sat up and pushed against his chest, and he fell back to the mattress. Hiking up her nightgown, she straddled his hips and tried to position herself to take him in. It didn't work.

Her gaze skittered to her husband's. Eyebrows flying high, he was most certainly shocked by her action. Which made Eleanor's brash ardor begin to cool. Why was she always so stupid in the bedchamber?

"Take off your gown," he ordered.

She looked at Octavius again. His brow had lowered and a fierce heat lit his eyes. Eleanor did as requested, her body prickling anew with anticipation, and he reached a hand down to hold himself

steady as she sank onto him.

“Mmmmmmm.” She closed her eyes. Not a single thought swam through her brain. She could only feel, smell, and hear: Octavius so deep inside her, the earthy scent of their bodies inside the closed bed curtains, the shuddering breath of her husband as she began to move back and forth.

With each stroke, she was further lost. The pleasure built fast. She braced her hands behind her, on his thighs, and rocked, drunk on carnal bliss; and when Octavius flicked his thumbs across her thrusting nipples she exploded in shudders so intense her teeth chattered, throwing her head back and savoring every second.

Finally spent, she righted herself and opened her eyes. Octavius stared at her. A modicum of sense returned, enough to provoke the beginnings of regret. It vanished again when he anchored her waist with his hands and began pumping his hips up and down. Before long she was swept up in the glory of the ride, the excitement building just as quickly as the last time.

Octavius drew his lips into a tight line. His eyes were so dark and intense Eleanor couldn't look away. A deep, cresting rumble from his chest quickened her response. Then he stiffened and pulled her flush against him, spilling himself inside her just as Eleanor came for the second time.

Completely done-in, she fell off and to the side like a limp rag. Octavius didn't move, though she heard him inhale a few times.

“My God, Eleanor!” Shock and dismay. Disgust even?

Shame, deep and painful, filled the void left by the fleeting ecstasy. She was still not worthy of being the Countess of Lexden. Abstinence and deprivation had taught her nothing.

Well, she knew what he thought of her; she didn't need him to voice his opinion. She turned to face the bed curtain, curling in upon herself, knowing if she ignored him he would go away. He always used to.

The mattress dipped as he sat up. A harsh light seared the enclosure as he pulled back the curtain and left.

Eleanor released the breath she'd held. She covered her naked body with the bed linen. How she would face this day, she did not know. But she couldn't hide from the day. Just then, Henry called for her.



LEX SLIPPED OUT OF Eleanor's bed and crossed to the washstand in search of a cloth to hand her. Six years. He'd gone six years without a woman, and the one he'd finally succumbed to was his unfaithful wife. God, he hoped the pleasure was worth the self-loathing that loomed up before him.

Then the boy called out. His son.

Hellfire, what had he just done? Had he created yet another Mayne child with corrupt blood? Before, he had always insisted Eleanor use preventative measures, like a sponge soaked in vinegar. How had they even had Henry in the first place?

His world upended, Lex tossed on his banyan and fled to the main corridor, leaving without another word. He couldn't face either Eleanor or Henry.

Like an illicit lover, he crept down the hall to his dressing room. His valet expressed no shock at seeing him enter through the servants' door, and Lex collapsed into the chair and flicked his hand, indicating the servant could commence with the morning shave. Today was going to be worse than yesterday. How could it not be? He had a son and he had lain again with his wife.

He cursed, moving his head just enough so the valet's razor nicked him. "My fault," he grumbled, pressing a scrap of linen to his cheek to stanch the blood.

He stared into the looking glass, not surprised to see his skin had turned ashen. In the space of thirty-six hours he had mucked up everything. Well, not everything. Mr. Robson was eager to begin work on the arsenal. Lex could—would—focus on business. Eleanor could attend to Mrs. Robson and the boy.

The boy.

His son. His heir.

He closed his eyes, refusing to look at himself.

"All done, my lord. Are you ready to dress?"

"Yes, Rogers. Something older and dark-colored, for I am at the arsenal again today."

Lex dressed in a hurry, eager to leave the house and all its occupants behind. When he was finished, he again departed through the servants' door, unwilling to assume Henry had left his bed.

A check of his watch showed eight o'clock. Most of Mayfair would still be asleep, so this was the perfect time to have breakfast at his club. But as he reached the main staircase, he pulled up short

as Eleanor approached from the opposite way. She gathered her skirts as if to turn back and then dropped them. She looked behind her and then down the stairs. She did not look at him.

So, she was embarrassed to have slept with him? Well, he could trump her there. His chest swelled with hot, irrational anger at the memory of what they had done. He was eviscerated. Another in a long line of irrational, idiotic decisions he'd made.

Her gaze strayed to the stairs, but she didn't move a muscle. A woman shouldn't look so grim after such a wild escapade. But that was Eleanor, always tense. Rigid even.

No, that wasn't true. When he'd met her, she was different. While certainly stressed due to her father's circumstances, she'd been a smiling, charming young lady. She'd told him amusing stories while they walked in the park. Her eyes had brightened at the sight of colorful flowers. She was never without a few crumbs of bread for the ducks. Young Eleanor had been *alive*.

Now she undoubtedly reserved her vivaciousness for Will Drummond, or whoever her current lover might be. Certainly there was not a shred of it thrown Lex's way.

"Regret is a most unfortunate emotion," Eleanor declared without warning, her voice sharp.

Lex stared at her. She shaded no truths. She regretted what they had just done together. Regretted their marriage. No doubt she *didn't* regret bedding Drummond, and thus she must bemoan the fact Lex was truly Henry's father.

"Indeed. I know the sentiment well after these six years." He flicked a glance at her abdomen. "You had better hope you are not with child again."

Without another word, he spun on his heel and exited the house as fast as his boots would carry him.



Chapter Eight



Lex spent the next five days as far from Hereford Street as possible. He'd never liked the house anyway. During daylight hours he was either at the arsenal with Elliot Robson or at his club. At night, he crept up the stairs like a thief and fell into bed only to toss and turn and try like the devil to put Eleanor and Henry from his mind.

This morning he'd arisen even earlier than usual, for yesterday he'd noticed a tousled brown head peeking through the bannister just before he left at eight. The boy had called out "Sir?" but Lex grabbed his hat and cane from Bickley and escaped, though not before that hopeful young expression was emblazoned into his memory. So, today he would leave at seven.

He started down the stairs after giving a wary glance down the corridor. A series of knocks on the front door interrupted his descent, and steps echoed loudly as the footman scurried to open it.

Lex continued downward, suspicious of who could be calling at such an early hour. In the hall below, the visitor was shaking raindrops off her cloak.

"Portia?"

His sister stared up at him, her dark blue eyes focused on him and hardened in a way he never would have expected.

"Portia!" Eleanor, cinched in a blue cotton wrapper, rushed past Lex and threw her arms around the girl, who returned the embrace. Lex gripped the railing, stunned by this display of affection—on both their parts.

"Why are you here?" Eleanor asked, pulling away.

"I could ask the same of you." Portia cast a mistrustful glance at Lex. "This is the last place I expected you to be."

Lex descended the remainder of the stairs but kept his distance

from the two women, who clutched hands as if fearful he would rip them asunder. "Eleanor is my wife. There is nothing odd about her presence here."

Said wife raised a honey-colored eyebrow.

Lex ignored her. "I as well am most interested to know why you are here, Portia. I do not recall inviting you."

His sister didn't say anything, simply stared at his waistcoat as she usually did when he visited her once a year. She was a small girl—no, at twenty she was a woman now—whose half boots might just raise her over the five foot mark. Her hair, the exact same shade of brown as Henry's, Lex now noticed, had tumbled out of its topknot and spilled across her still dripping cloak. Her bedraggled appearance and the early hour begged a repeat of the question:

"Why are you here?"

She jerked her head up to meet his gaze. Lex recognized the family scowl distorting her dainty features, even though this was the first time he'd seen her pull that expression. "I am here to demand that you allow me to wed the man I love!"

He opened his mouth to order her right back into whatever vehicle had conveyed her to London, but Eleanor spoke first. "Let's have breakfast, shall we?" She swept Portia's cloak off and handed it to the footman. "Please have Cook send up whatever is ready. Portia, you'll want to refresh yourself while I change."

Bemused by this turn of events, Lex allowed his wife to lead Portia up the stairs. Very well, Portia could have breakfast and *then* she was going back to Somerset. He did not need a wife, a son, and a sister to plague him.

Though sorely tempted to leave for the arsenal as planned, Lex stayed to ensure his sister's swift departure. Within a quarter of an hour, the two of them plus Eleanor were awkwardly settled around the table, Lex at the head and his wife and sister adjacent to him and across from each other.

He ought to give his sister a stern glare, but Eleanor was so close he could have reached out and brushed a thumb across her cheek. He didn't, but still couldn't look away from her. She was beautiful, truly. He hadn't lied when he'd described her as the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. The ever-changing color of her eyes never failed to awe him. This morning they were darker, shaded almost brown. Was that because of the overcast day or because of the tumultuous emotions passing between them?

Portia's fork clashed against her plate. Lex jerked his gaze away, but not before noticing the bewildered look on Eleanor's face.

He turned to his sister. "Your behavior has been unseemly to say the least. By the look of you, and by the time of day, I gather you traveled all night. I am certain I do not need to tell you what a poor decision that was, especially in light of the fact that I have already turned down Mr. Semple's offer for your hand. As you well know."

As he spoke, a defiant light crept into his sister's eyes. However, in the end she sagged against the back of her chair and proclaimed, "But I love him! Can't you see that? I traveled all night because I love him and must marry him."

"You say you love him, and yet your supposed affection has caused you to care so little for your reputation."

Portia stared at the uneaten food on her plate and mumbled, "You only care about my reputation because you intend to sell me off in a business arrangement."

What little he'd eaten soured in Lex's stomach. "I beg your pardon?"

His sister lifted her shoulder in a dainty shrug. "Eleanor said you probably intended to offer my hand in marriage in order to secure a business deal."

Eleanor gasped. Lex wished he could breathe, but the accusation crushed down upon his chest. He would never use Portia as a pawn in a negotiation. She could marry whatever suitable gentleman she chose.

He should have expected no less of his wife, though.

When he turned to her, Eleanor swallowed and addressed her plate. "Under the circumstances in which we were married, I just thought..." She glanced at Portia. "I was only jesting."

"When did this conversation take place?" Lex asked, too dumbfounded to contemplate the first part of her statement. Eleanor and Portia truly had been conniving behind his back?

Eleanor waved a hand. "Mostly, Portia and I only communicate through letters."

"How long has this been going on?" And what else didn't he know?

"Since you banned me from visiting Mayne Castle," Portia interjected.

He silenced his sister with a glare. "I didn't ban you from visiting Mayne Castle. I banned you from leaving Somerset without

my permission. You never asked to return.” Lex turned to Eleanor again. “What do you mean by ‘mostly’?”

She opened her eyes wide. “Henry and I visited her two years ago. Surely there is no harm in our corresponding...” She trailed off as Lex lifted his eyebrows.

“You maligned me to my sister. We haven’t communicated in years, and yet you felt you knew me well enough to assess my intentions regarding my sister’s marriage?”

Eleanor’s chin rose; she wasn’t going to hold back. “I don’t need to correspond with you in order to know what an ogre you are. Your actions alone define your nature.”

Even though he’d known a blow was coming, he couldn’t keep from flinching at the word “ogre.”

Eleanor blinked rapidly and stood. “Portia, Henry will be over the moon about your visit. Let us go to the nursery.”

“Henry is here?” Lex’s sister cast a wary glance his way, as if she couldn’t believe the child had survived living under the same roof as her brother. “I would love to see him.”

Lex rose, letting the pair leave without hindrance. Then he sat back down with a heavy sigh. So, he wasn’t the only one who thought he was a monster. Eleanor certainly did, and Portia... She hadn’t exactly smiled favorably upon him at any time since her arrival.

Yet, what did it matter? He had never cared to solicit their good opinion, so why should he care that he did not have it?

He shouldn’t care.

He didn’t care.

It was time to meet Mr. Robson at the arsenal.

Lex abandoned his breakfast and headed for his study to retrieve some papers. As he entered the room, movement in the corner caught his eye. Henry was gathering up his soldiers, destroying the Battle of Talavera.

“What are you doing?” Lex asked. “You are free to leave them there if you wish.” Though, that was a foolish thing to say if he wanted to avoid the child.

“I do not wish,” Henry retorted, sweeping his arms through an entire company. “Sir.”

So, everyone was in a foul mood this morning. “Your mother is looking for you. She has someone she wants you to meet. My sister Portia.”

“Aunt Portia?” Henry jumped up, abandoning his soldiers, and tore out of the room.

Lex ground his teeth. Of course his son was thrilled to see his sister; the three of them had seemingly formed a clandestine family behind his back. God, if Portia had been in contact with their mother, he would—

He shook his head and snatched up the papers he needed. His mother didn’t bear thinking about.



HE ARRIVED AT THE ARSENAL in Battersea to find Mr. Robson already in deep conversation with Samuel Collett, the man whom Lex had hired as assistant superintendent. He nodded to them both and began spreading his papers on the worktable nearest the window.

Robson joined him after a moment, smiling brightly. “Good morning. May I thank you again? Mrs. Robson is so delighted to be planning the ball with your lady.”

Lex tried to smile. He did. But after the morning he’d had, the task seemed Herculean. He managed to say, “Excellent. Now, what do you think of Collett? I suppose I should have waited to hire him, but I wanted the assistant superintendent here from the start, to gain as much insight from you as he can.”

Robson eyed Lex for a long moment before turning to study Collett, who was examining one of the rifles Robson had brought from the United States. “I think he will do well, though I will let you know if at any time I think otherwise. He is quite intelligent, I see, and more importantly he is keen to begin.”

“So, let us begin,” Lex said, this time with a true smile. “Mr. Collett, please join us.”

Lex unfurled a large piece of parchment and secured the corners with small weights. He had already drawn a layout of the factory, which was necessarily located adjacent to the Thames in order to harness its water power. Robson spent the next hour advising of the best positions for the machinery, which Lex sketched out.

Eventually, Lex pushed away from the table and stretched. “I could do with a drink. Why don’t we pay a visit to the Swan?”

Robson nodded but Collett shook his bald head. “I’m to meet with a few fellas about standing guard overnight, once the equipment arrives. Thanks all the same.”

“I will bring something back for you,” Lex said.

He and Robson walked out into the sunshine and strolled up Battersea Bridge Road. As they did, the American ventured, “You seemed a little out of sorts this morning, lad. Is all well with you?”

“My sister arrived this morning....” Damnation. He was accustomed to dry conversations about the weather and shooting, not questions of a personal nature. Robson had caught him off guard and Lex had spoken before he thought. At least he hadn’t said, *I acknowledged my son last week*, or *I made love to my wife for the first time in six years*, or worse still, *My wife despises me*. All in all, he supposed the admission of his sister’s arrival was fairly innocuous.

“Are you not happy to see her?”

“No. I mean, yes, of course I am. However, I wasn’t expecting her and I’m quite busy at the moment.”

Lex pulled open the door to the tavern and ushered Robson inside. The Swan was old, almost ancient, and its low-ceilinged room buzzed with the noise of hungry dock workers, sailors reliving past adventures, and tavern maids calling for drinks. Merchants and other local factory owners frequented the tavern as well, and Lex enjoyed the atmosphere. Now that they were here, he hoped the American would be distracted.

He was not. After they ordered ale, roast beef, and bread, and a serving girl delivered their fare to a scarred oaken table, Robson said, “Tell me about your sister. I cannot help but be intrigued by her impromptu arrival.”

Lex took a long swallow of ale. “She is twenty years of age and resides at my estate in Somerset.”

Robson tipped his head to the side. “Oh, she does not live with your wife, then.”

“No.” Lex tore off a chunk of bread and sopped up the juice of the roast beef. When he said no more, the older man stared at him for moment then nodded and began to eat.

Robson said nothing, yet guilt pricked Lex’s conscience. What could it hurt to discuss Portia? Perhaps Robson could even suggest how to handle her ridiculous demand. “She wishes to marry a man called Semple. He is the steward of a neighboring estate.”

“I sense you don’t approve.”

“He wrote to me to seek my permission, as he must since I am my sister’s guardian. He is a likable enough man, and under other

circumstances I might be able to look past his lack of connections. Even though he is twice Portia's age, she is besotted with him." Lex hiked an eyebrow. "She wrote me a four-page letter extolling his virtues."

Robson grinned. "And yet...?"

"And yet, through judicious inquiries I have learned a few troublesome things about him. Things which make me hesitate, considering my sister's sizable dowry. So, I've refused Mr. Semple's suit."

"And now Lady Portia has arrived on your doorstep to plead his case," Robson said, shaking his head and taking a drink. "Having ushered two daughters through their marriageable years, I can see why you are in such a state."

In a state? Did he truly seem to be in one? Lex took that as a reminder to keep a tight rein on his emotions. He couldn't let them once again affect his decisions. He shrugged to project a calm air and said, "It is a straightforward enough matter. The man is unsuitable for my sister. I turned him down."

Robson cut a piece of beef and chewed thoughtfully, a benign action that somehow made Lex's pulse race with dread. He put his head down and concentrated on his own meal.

"You have informed Lady Portia of your concerns, haven't you?" Robson finally asked, raising his voice over a sudden cheer from the far corner.

"I told her he was unsuitable."

"Of course you did. And naturally, she is a young woman who trusts her older brother's judgment, who has no reason to doubt the wisdom of someone so close to her, of someone who has always looked out for her best interests." Robson set his fork down and rolled his shoulders. "I wonder, then, if perhaps the fragile state of her lovesick mind is causing her not to see the matter as clearly as you do."

Lex's relationship with his sister was nothing like what Robson described. Still, Portia should trust him. He did have her best interests at heart. He wasn't such an *ogre* that he didn't care about her happiness, nor had he ever had any intention of using Portia's maiden status to further a business deal. Perhaps her mind truly was clouded by her feelings for Semple. What Eleanor's excuse was, Lex couldn't say.

"On the other hand," Robson continued unexpectedly, "perhaps

Lady Portia's full faculties could be restored by a simple explanation of Semple's transgressions."

Lex jerked his head up and stared at Robson. Was the older man criticizing his handling of the situation?

Robson leaned forward. "Lex, it might be uncomfortable to talk to your sister about whatever delicate issue plagues Mr. Semple, but in the end she should see reason—if she is a rational girl, and you have given me no reason to believe otherwise. Have Eleanor accompany you. I'm sure her presence will help allay any of Lady Portia's concerns." The American leaned back and waved a hand through the air. "Then, afterwards, distraction is the key. Get your sister out and about where she can meet other young men who will make her forget Mr. Semple. Simple."

"Simpler just to reiterate my refusal and send her back to Somerset."

Robson burst out laughing, which made Lex realize he'd voiced his private thought. How embarrassing. But as he watched the American's eyes brighten with mirth, he couldn't help but smile in return. It almost felt natural.

"Of course it would be easier," Robson said, nodding. "But you might lose the admiration and love of your sister. Family relationships require a lot of hard work—but they are worth it in the end."

Lex's smile vanished.

I'm sorry, son. Those words, issued on a dying breath, echoed in his mind.

Sorry means nothing when you are dead, Father.

Family relationships were *not* always worth it. Quite often they left one crushed and defeated, barely able to carry on. Not worth the pain at all.

Robson sought his gaze. "Trust me. Talk to your sister and then let her stay for the ball. You won't regret it."

Lex grimaced. He already regretted bringing Eleanor to London a thousand times over. Then there were the thousand regrets about letting Henry remain. Could he bear another thousand for Portia?

He slid across the wooden bench and stood. "I will order a sandwich for Collett. Then we can return to the arsenal." Revenge, after all, was what this was all about. Revenge upon Drummond. It would be worth it in the end. It was the only thing that mattered.

Robson followed, and they ambled back toward the warehouse

once Lex had the paper-wrapped sandwich in hand. The older man was blissfully silent for half the journey. Then he asked, "When will the machinery be delivered?"

Business. Thank God.

"Four more days. Do you think we can be up and running a month after that?"

"That's an ambitious timetable but I admire you for it. You could forsake your title, move to America, and do quite well in our little country."

Lex shook his head. "Not many Englishmen appreciate my ambitions in trade."

Robson grinned again. "They just might when they see how you have helped your country's army."

They arrived back at the building on Old Swan Lane. At the door, Lex drew it open and allowed Robson to enter first. "That," he said, "is exactly why I brought you over to assist me. We will—"

He stopped short, seeing Collett in conversation with a polished, well-dressed man who smiled like a conniving fox. Which was exactly what William Drummond was.



Chapter Nine



Eleanor and Portia climbed to the nursery but did not find Henry. That boy never seemed to be where he should.

“You do not seem concerned that Henry isn’t here,” Portia said, wandering around the room and looking at several old toys.

“Oh, we will know soon enough where he is—when Octavius roars.”

Portia giggled, and Eleanor felt as if she might float. Having Portia—someone she could confide in—appear in London was a boon she’d never dreamed of. Although, she shouldn’t be quite so surprised, for Portia had done something this rash once before with her visit to Mayne Castle. And she couldn’t quite fault Octavius for his anger. Portia’s unauthorized and unchaperoned travels could ruin her. But enough had been said about that already.

Eleanor threw her arms around her sister-in-law. “I am so glad you are here. In the past few days I’ve had to keep thoughts like that to myself and I am exhausted from the effort.”

Portia laid her head on Eleanor’s shoulder. “I couldn’t have been happier to see your face. Thank you for championing me. You are extraordinarily brave to stand up to my brother.” The young woman sighed. “I have come to the conclusion he just isn’t a nice person.”

So many of his actions and words supported his sister’s assessment. And yet, Eleanor remembered how he had come to dinner after she rang a peal over his head. How he had rescued the Robsons’ son and then downplayed the event. How he had apologized with no prompting whatsoever. Octavius was more complex than simply “not nice.”

Eleanor also felt nothing like brave.

She kissed Portia’s head and stepped back. “He does seem

oblivious to his horrid behavior. I could be generous and attribute that to the absence of your parents in his life, but then you have grown up under the same circumstances and you are a sweet girl.”

Portia’s eyes darkened to a stormy blue. “I wouldn’t have had to grow up without my mother if Lex wasn’t such an...an uncaring beast.”

Their mother was dead. Surely Octavius couldn’t be blamed for that. Eleanor laid a hand on the girl’s arm. “You may fault your brother for many things, but you cannot—”

“I can so! I most certainly do blame him for not letting me live with my mother.” Portia jerked her arm back and mulishly folded both arms beneath her chest. “What kind of person keeps a little girl from her only living parent?”

“Your mother—” *Your mother is alive?* Eleanor rocked back on her heels. How had she not known the dowager countess still lived?

Because she and Octavius never discussed anything intimate. She knew nothing about his family except what she’d learned from Portia’s letters, and that hadn’t been much because even Portia didn’t mention her mother. Until now. Since Lady Lexden had never been spoken of by either sibling, Eleanor had assumed she had died.

She cleared her throat and tried to be reasonable in the face of confusion. “Is your mother unwell? Perhaps she was not capable of caring for a child.”

“How would I know? He won’t even let me correspond with her.” Fat tears welled up in Portia’s eyes and dribbled down her cheeks. “He’s cut me off from everyone—my mother, you, Henry, Mr. Semple. He hates me.”

The last came out on a choking sob that tugged at Eleanor’s heart. She put her arm around Portia and drew her over to the sofa in the corner. “I’m so sorry, my dear. Why did you never mention your mother to me?”

Pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, the girl sniffed into the linen square. “I liked that our correspondence was cheerful and full of the good things in our lives. When you came to visit, I was so ecstatic to see you and Henry that I put aside my troubles. Besides, what would have been the use? Though I admire your courage in standing up to him, you are just as powerless as I to change his mind about anything.”

Eleanor had always thought she was, but recent events gave her a new perspective. She reached out and smoothed back a lock of

Portia's chestnut hair. "Do you know where your mother lives?"

The girl shrugged. "She is in Edinburgh, but it does not matter. Lex would confine me to a dungeon if I attempted to write her."

There was a dungeon at Mayne Castle, but even Eleanor couldn't imagine her ogre of a husband resorting to such medieval practices. She dredged up a smile. "A convent, more like."

Portia stared at the handkerchief in her hands, unmoved by the jest, and her forlornness twisted Eleanor's heart. The girl's original guardian, appointed by her father, was an elderly and distant cousin who settled her in Somerset with himself and his sister as companions; even Eleanor had been able to see during her brief visit that they were not very nurturing. Upon Octavius reaching his majority, he'd been appointed his sister's new guardian, but he'd changed nothing. The elderly female cousin continued as Portia's companion, and a governess was hired at the appropriate age. All in all, Portia's childhood had been isolated and lacking in affection. So, the question remained, why had her mother had no say in her daughter's upbringing?

If Eleanor wanted an answer, why not go to the source?

"I'll write to your mother."

"You will?" Portia's eyes shone brightly beneath the tears.

"Yes." Just saying the word convinced Eleanor she was doing the right thing. She could handle Octavius's approbation. She would do so willingly in order to possibly reunite a mother and her child. "Yes, I'll establish a correspondence with her to see what her situation is. What can you tell me about her?"

"Nothing much, I'm afraid. After our father died, my mother disappeared and Lex went off to Harrow. I was sent to Somerset." Portia swiped her handkerchief across her nose and sniffled. "I was very young, so I don't remember much. Just that my father, my mother and Lex were all gone. I asked about my mother—of course I did—but the answers were usually vague. I thought for certain once Lex turned twenty-one and became my guardian he would let me visit her. But he just ignored my pleas and pretends she doesn't even exist."

Very mysterious. Of course, while Eleanor was surprised that Lady Lexden hadn't raised her daughter, there were a number of possible explanations. Lady Lexden could indeed be ill or otherwise unable to care for her child, and perhaps everyone had been afraid to tell Portia. Or possibly, in a fit of vindictiveness, the previous

earl had arranged the guardianship and trust to exclude his wife. Like father, like son? Though, Eleanor must own that Octavius had never followed through on his threat to remove Henry from her care.

Yet.

The third possibility that came to her mind was the worst: Perhaps Lady Lexden hadn't wanted to raise her daughter. So, yes, it was best that Eleanor contact her. Once she knew the dowager and her situation, she could work out a plan to reunite Portia with her mother if such was possible.

She leaned over and hugged Portia. "I will do what I can for you, sweet girl, but please know that what I discover about your mother may not be to your liking. It may not be possible for you to see her, for a number of reasons."

"Lex won't approve," Portia muttered into Eleanor's shoulder, but Eleanor leaned back and winked at her.

"Since he doesn't approve of anything I do, I'm not likely to disappoint him. Do not worry, he doesn't frighten me."

He didn't, she realized. He upset her, he frustrated her, he worried and befuddled her, but he did not frighten her. She would, necessarily, need to be secretive in her letter-postings, but she could manage that with the help of a footman.

Portia smiled, and it was like dawn broke across her face. "Thank you." She stood up and looked around. "Where is that little rascal? Oh!" She rushed to the other corner of the room and grabbed a cloth doll from a shelf. "I remember this. It used to be mine."

The young woman traced a finger around the doll's face, wearing a lost-in-the-past smile, and Eleanor studied the doll and her young sister-in-law from afar. Portia was such a small girl and yet she had spirit—when she wasn't browbeaten by Octavius, of course. While her admiration for Mr. Semple had been evident in her letters to Eleanor, her willingness to risk her brother's wrath by coming to London signaled her love and devotion.

Eleanor bit her lip, dashing away a flash of jealousy. Not everyone could be swept up in a grand romance, and if anyone deserved to be, it was Portia, this young girl essentially banished to live by herself. Eleanor would do all she could to help, not only because Portia deserved to be happy but because Octavius was, as in so many things, wrong about his sister and Mr. Semple. Her

husband could know nothing of love.

"I cannot believe I forgot this doll when I moved away," Portia remarked. "I used to never let her out of my sight."

"You used to live here?" Henry asked from the doorway.

Portia spun around and sank down, opening her arms. "Yes, I did, dear boy."

Henry hesitated for only a second, then flew into Portia's embrace and Eleanor blinked away tears. Her two favorite people, the people she considered her true family, were reuniting again.

"I haven't seen you since you were a wee little boy," Portia said, swinging Henry around in her arms. "I am not surprised at how big you are, though, for you write very fine letters indeed."

Eleanor watched the two smile and giggle, feeling as if her heart were aglow. That was a silly description, as silly as Portia "introducing" her doll to Henry, but she didn't care. She was happy. How strange that she would end up happy here, of all places, where she had been most miserable. Of course, the feeling wouldn't last. Octavius would send Portia away—and probably Henry too.

She pushed that thought from her mind, intent on making the most of the present, and the three of them spent the next three-quarters of an hour having a grand time. Then Eleanor and Portia left Henry and his nurse with their tea, for Mrs. Robson would be arriving soon to discuss the upcoming plans.

"I cannot believe Lex is hosting a ball," Portia said as they descended to the drawing room to wait. "Clearly you do have some influence, Eleanor."

Granted, Eleanor didn't admit much right to explain her husband's business to Portia, but since they were meeting with Mrs. Robson she should let the younger woman know what was going on. So, as they entered the drawing room, she took Portia's hands into her own. "Octavius has plans to set up an arsenal. He needs Mr. Robson's expertise and wants me to entertain Mrs. Robson while they work."

"Hmph. You were right. He uses you to further his trade, and he will do the same with me." An ugly scowl marred Portia's face. "What do we care of this arsenal? Why do you bend to his will on this, Eleanor, when you are willing to fight for me?"

"Of course I don't wish to, but—"

Bickley stepped into the room. "Mrs. Robson has arrived."

Eleanor shot Portia a quick look, one she hoped would convey

her position between the rock and the hard place. "Please, show her in."

Justine sailed in, her smile bright. "Good morning." She curtsied but did not let the action interrupt her flow of words. "I've had so many ideas for the ball, Eleanor. You may soon be wishing you hadn't asked for my help." Then her gaze fixed on Portia. "Oh, I am so sorry. I am Mrs. Robson. And who might this lovely creature be?"

A polite Englishwoman would have waited patiently to be introduced, but Eleanor found Mrs. Robson's informal manner charming. "Portia, may I present Mrs. Robson? This is Lady Portia Mayne, the earl's sister."

The American woman curtsied again and smiled her motherly smile. "I am delighted to meet you."

"And I you," Portia said politely enough, though Eleanor thought her expression still dark from the previous conversation. "I hope you are enjoying London."

Eleanor led them over to sit down; Portia chose the chair closest to the fireplace, while she and Justine arranged their skirts on one of the sofas.

"My visit has been wonderful so far," Mrs. Robson said. "Your brother and Eleanor have been most gracious. I am, however, eager to plan this ball, as I miss Society's entertainments. I want to see how our English cousins enjoy themselves."

Portia cut a glance at Eleanor, surprised that the older woman had used Eleanor's Christian name. Eleanor just smiled at her sister-in-law, indicating the informality was approved, and then turned back.

"I do not see why we have to wait until the ball to enjoy some entertainment. Octavius receives plenty of invitations." Why, Eleanor didn't know. Her husband was the most unsociable creature alive, earl or not. But, then, Society seemed perverse in its favors. "Let me send for them and we shall choose our pleasure."

She summoned Richard the footman.

"Eleanor, are you certain Lexden will approve?" Portia asked. "He does not like you to do things without his consent."

What on earth? Hadn't Portia just championed Eleanor's bravery? Why would she remark upon such a private thing so openly? Eleanor wanted to say something, anything, to alleviate the crackling silence overtaking the room, but just then Richard

arrived. She spoke to the footman in a rush and gave him his instructions regarding collecting any recent social invitations.

As she turned back, Justine smiled. "Lady Portia, what kind of entertainments do *you* enjoy?"

A hint of danger sparked in Octavius's sister's blue eyes. Eleanor opened her mouth but couldn't find her tongue fast enough.

"I am not certain I will be remaining in Town long enough to attend any affairs." Portia let her shoulders drop. "Though I've barely arrived, my brother demands that I return to Somerset."

"Oh. Goodness," Justine said.

Richard the footman reappeared. Eleanor placed the handful of invitations on the low table in front of the sofa, her heart pounding. Portia was understandably angry at her brother, but that anger could lose Eleanor her son. And it would surely lose Portia any opportunity to remain in town. What had happened to the disheartened, sobbing girl of half an hour ago? Clearly, a lifetime of isolation had rendered her less mature than her years.

"You will come to the ball, dear Portia. Octavius can have no plans to send his *loving* sister away," Eleanor said, praying that the warning would suffice. With trembling fingers, she spread out the fine vellum invitations. "Now, what shall we choose, ladies?" She smiled knowingly at Justine. "A musicale would be lovely. Or a rout would do."

Portia's lips firmed into a brief pout, but then she smiled, albeit reluctantly, and helped sort through the missives.

Eventually the three women decided on a soiree to be given in two nights' time by one Mrs. Ardmore. Eleanor had no idea what she was getting herself into, but for the enjoyment of Portia and Justine, and toward the annoyance of Octavius, she would happily dive in. She dashed off a note to Mrs. Ardmore, accepting her invitation, and called for tea.

"What will you wear?" Justine asked before nibbling on a raisin biscuit.

Oh. Eleanor had not thought this through. "I have not taken the time to order a new wardrobe yet, so I suppose I will have to wear the same dress I wore to dinner last night."

"As that dress is lovely, especially so on you, it makes a dashing choice." Mrs. Robson winked. "Only I will know it's not brand-new, and I will not whisper a word about the matter."

"Nor will I," Portia said. "I brought my best gown in the hopes

Lex would allow me—”

“To stay,” Eleanor finished for her, fearful the young girl meant to mention Mr. Semple. If only she could get the girl alone and reiterate how important the Robsons were—to Eleanor keeping Henry, if not to Octavius’s business.

“Allow you to stay?” Justine interjected. “I don’t understand.”

Ugh. Now Eleanor was adding to the coil. She could not do this.

“Lexden does not allow me to travel *anywhere*,” Portia whined.

Eleanor wanted to crawl into a cave. But she would rectify matters. “He doesn’t allow you to travel without a chaperone, you mean. A caution any caring brother would take.” She wanted to give her sister-in-law the fierce glare she reserved for Henry’s most trying moments, but Justine was watching and so she forced a smile. “Now, let us turn to planning our own affair. We first must settle on a date.”

The three of them proceeded to plan the ball for ten days hence. Portia kept quieter, thank heavens, though her youthful energy returned as they discussed refreshments, decorations, and music. Eleanor’s spirits began to rebound as well.

“Ladies,” Justine finally said, her eyes sparkling, “we have worked hard all morning and I think we deserve a treat.”

“Yes,” Portia agreed.

Eleanor chuckled. “You do not even know what she is proposing, dear sister.” She turned to Mrs. Robson and raised an eyebrow.

“Shopping,” that lady said with a broad smile. “We must look divine for this ball of ours, and we won’t be able to give the seamstress much time. Do you think your modiste can manage it, Eleanor?”

She didn’t have a modiste, but it would be easy enough to take the group to the one who had sold her the Duchess of Burnham’s castoff. Eleanor stood. “I’ll call for the carriage.”

“Oh, this will be grand,” Justine said, rising and shaking out her skirts. “Just like shopping with my daughters.”

And so Eleanor’s plan to suggest Portia stay behind to entertain Henry flew up the chimney. The girl had better control her tongue.

Perhaps a bribe would help.

“Portia, you must need a new gown. Even if you don’t, I insist you have one. You cannot leave London without something in the first stare of fashion.” If she paid for it out of her pin money, Octavius could not gainsay her. After all, he’d insisted the money

was Eleanor's to do with as she wished.

Portia's sweet smile made her feel much better as the three of them headed off to Bond Street.



WILLIAM DRUMMOND HAD no business here. Lex paused just inside the doorway of the warehouse, but only for a moment. He strode ahead, glancing across the room at the worktable where his sketches were visible. Apparently he would need those guards Collett was hiring to keep watch during the day as well.

"Mr. Collett?" he questioned, stopping squarely in front of Drummond. Robson did not pause and made his way directly to the worktable.

"My lord, Mr. Drummond was waiting for you. Says 'e's a friend." Behind Drummond's shoulder, Collett cast a suspicious look at the interloper.

"We are acquainted," Lex allowed. They had been enemies from the first. Why hadn't he challenged Drummond to a duel when the man admitted to cuckolding him? Would that have driven Drummond out of his life forever? A duel certainly would have ruined Lex's life. He'd either be dead or hiding out on the Continent. Although, possibly not, since the family honor had already been tarnished beyond repair by his parents.

He held out Collett's sandwich. "Your assistance is appreciated. We will resume working in thirty minutes' time."

The assistant superintendent took the food with a smart nod and retreated to the small office in the corner.

Drummond watched the exchange, but when Collett was out of earshot, his pleasant expression turned into a sneer. "Making the descent from peer to tradesman to servant rather rapidly, aren't you, Lexden?"

Lex allowed the insult to pass and simply stared at Drummond. The man fell an inch or two short of his own six feet, and he probably weighed two to three stone less. As always, his black coat and matching trousers fit perfectly, but in Lex's dusty warehouse, with dirt drifting onto his glossy Hessians like newly fallen snow, he looked like a fop who had taken a wrong turn on his way to Carlton House.

"I can think of no business that would bring you here," Lex said. Unless the elder Drummond had sent him to talk Lex out of

competing for the government's rifle contract.

His enemy slid a gaze sideways toward Robson. "I was curious about your mysterious visitor."

Lex ground his teeth. Why couldn't Drummond keep his nose—and other body parts—out of what didn't concern him? His father must indeed have asked him to gather information.

After debating internally, Lex decided there was no advantage for Drummond in meeting Robson. He said, "Nothing mysterious about him." He turned. "Mr. Robson, would you join us please?"

Robson sauntered over, and Lex made the introductions. "Mr. Robson is the former superintendent of the Harpers Ferry Armory who has kindly agreed to assist me."

Drummond's lips twisted in confusion. "Harpers Ferry? I'm afraid I don't know where that is."

"Virginia," Robson answered, not without pride.

"You came all the way from America?" Drummond's eyes widened, but he checked his surprise and blanked his expression. "Welcome to our country. I had no idea you Americans possessed such vast knowledge in small arms manufacturing."

Drummond's sarcastic tone was not lost on Robson, who smiled and replied, "It is amazing what independence will do for innovation. We've come quite far in the past twenty to thirty years."

"Spoken like a true American. Independence is the be-all and end-all." Drummond looked Robson up and down, his mouth twisted in disdain, his eyes openly hostile. "I can't imagine why your country is risking its precious independence by clamoring for war. Ah well, we'd be more than happy to re-colonize you wayward souls."

"Thankfully, my faith in negotiations was rewarded and war has been averted," Robson said.

Drummond donned a nasty smirk. "Lucky indeed." He then turned a sly eye to Lex. "How fares Lady Lexden, my lord?"

William Drummond knew how to hit the bull's eye—though he had a lot to shoot at. Did he mean Eleanor, the woman with whom he'd had an affair? Or did he mean Lex's mother, the woman with whom Drummond's father had an affair? Lex's chest constricted. He couldn't look away from Drummond's mocking blue eyes.

Wait. Those eyes... The way the eyelids arched high in the middle and the lashes flew up at the end. Their blue-grey color...

Oh, God.

Lex fell back a step. Drummond's face stood out in stark relief. Those were Portia's eyes. And Drummond's narrow chin was identical to his sister's.

Portia. She wasn't his father's daughter.

Lex's vision contracted until all he saw were bits of red and black colliding. His stomach clenched in painful agony, souring the meal he'd just eaten. Henry wasn't illegitimate, but Portia was. Had their father even known?

As if from a distance, he heard Robson's voice.

"Lady Lexden is quite well. My wife and I had the pleasure of meeting her last week. His lordship has shown us great hospitality since our arrival."

Robson clapped Lex on the shoulder, jolting him from his hellish reverie. Lex dragged in a breath and focused again on Drummond, who stuck his chin out, the force of which action caused a lock of black hair to fall across his forehead.

"I am glad to hear she is well. I'm quite eager to resume my acquaintance with her."

Lex shoved his fisted hand behind his back, the temptation great to knock that supercilious smile off Drummond's face. If Eleanor and the man took up again... Which was the lesser evil—challenging the knave to a duel, or divorcing his wife over her adultery? He felt himself slipping further into that swirling haze of rage, so instead he threw another shovel of dirt on his shock and anger, burying it deeper.

With an effort he managed, "We've a good amount of work to do yet today."

It was clearly meant as a dismissal.

"It was nice to meet you," Robson chimed in, with a big—and false?—smile.

Drummond bowed sharply, a feral smile still shaping his lips; he had scored the only hit that mattered and now was pushing his advantage. "Give my regards to Lady Lexden. No, on second thought, never mind. I'm sure I shall be seeing her soon. Good day, gentlemen." He snatched his hat from a nearby sawhorse and swaggered off, out of the building.

Robson's smile vanished. "You look as if you need to sit."

Lex shook his head. "Let's return to our work."

At the table, he planted both palms on the smooth oak surface and hung his head, his breath rattling in his chest. He had faced

many ugly truths in his lifetime. What was one more? He closed his eyes and took charge of what he could control. Breaths, even. Muscles, locked against trembling. Brain, shut off from thinking about anything but rifles.

Robson moved to the opposite side of the table and picked up a pencil. "That young man doesn't like you."

"Ha," Lex said without humor. He looked up, surprised to see...was it sympathy on the older man's tanned face?

Robson flipped his pencil end over end and tapped on the table, the rhythmic sound echoing through the empty warehouse. "May I ask what you have done to deserve his antipathy?"

Lex straightened. For St. Bartholomew's sake, he was *not* an ogre. Why did everyone blame him—? He turned a fierce look on Robson and found the older man's eyebrows quirked in that now-familiar teasing manner. Lex couldn't smile, not where Drummond and his family were involved, but he unclenched his muscles and eased his shoulders back, glad he hadn't said the first thing that came to mind.

He said instead, "The feeling is mutual. I would like nothing better than for him to just go away." Far away, where the jackanapes would never realize he had a claim, as a brother by blood, on Portia's affections. "He's a thorn in my side, and I do believe that is all he aims for in life."

The reverse was once again true. Once Lex crushed his family financially, Drummond wouldn't be worth another thought. Of course, just a few days ago he had called Eleanor a thorn in his side. How fitting.

"He bears a grudge then," Robson said. "Were you at school together? Do your families have a connection?"

Lex pulled a stool over and sat down. He and Drummond had both gone to Harrow, Lex just after his father died. Each had known exactly who the other was. After numerous fisticuffs and a final threat of being sent home, they'd settled into a quieter hatred. After going their separate ways at university, Lex had hoped to never see William Drummond again. But apparently he'd been lying in wait and struck the worst blow possible.

Enough. He couldn't think, speak, or hear any more about the Drummonds. Robson was going too far, asking about such personal issues. Lex leaned over and plucked the pencil from the other man's hand, bent over the paper, adding detail to his sketches, saying

nothing, and not looking at the American. He could feel Robson's gaze, though. Could imagine the worried frown and concerned eyes.

Finally the man spoke in a soft drawl. "I am sorry."

A shiver went up Lex's spine.

Boots shuffling on the dirt floor, the American walked a few feet away and called for Collett. Lex just stared at the paper before him, unseeing. It would be so easy to think of the man as a nosy old codger. Instead, he had the unsettling, and unfathomable, feeling that Robson actually cared.



Chapter Ten



Eleanor wasn't able to get Portia alone, completely alone without even a servant around, until after dinner that evening. The two of them each read Henry a story before tucking him into bed, and now they were uncomfortably settled in the ugly sitting room.

Portia smiled over her embroidery hoop. "Thank you for ordering that gown. I doubt I will get to wear it to your ball, but I'm thrilled to have something new."

Their shopping trip with Mrs. Robson had been delightful and fruitful. Portia, awed by the sights and sounds of London, not to mention fascinated by the luxurious fabrics and accompanying fripperies, had been on her best behavior for the rest of the afternoon. All three ladies had ordered gowns for the ball, plus Eleanor had been able to purchase two more ready-made dresses which should assuage Octavius's wardrobe worries. All in all, the day had turned out rather well. And here was Portia giving her the perfect opening.

She slid onto the settle, laying the book she'd brought with her on the hard wooden seat. "Your brother will be more likely to let you remain if you strive not to ruin his relationship with the Robsons."

"Eleanor." Portia sounded like Henry when he whined about not being tired. "I don't give a fig about Lex, his trade, or how much or how little the Robsons like him. And I can't believe you do."

"If I don't participate in his scheme, he says he will take Henry from me."

"That odious monster!" Portia jumped up and tossed her hoop on the chair she'd vacated. "He won't do it, Eleanor. He won't. He cares nothing for Henry. He cares for no one. Why would he saddle himself with a child?"

"I have no intention of calling his bluff." Eleanor tried to keep her voice even. If she remained calm, Portia would be more likely to see this situation in a straightforward manner. "He wouldn't *have* to have any more to do with Henry. He'd simply hire a nurse."

"Why does he think he can play with us like puppets? I hate him so much!"

Eleanor often felt the same, but when Portia said the words, they sounded...melodramatic, juvenile even. Regardless, this talk was not having the desired effect on her sister-in-law. "Portia, please. We will all benefit if you keep your thoughts about Octavius to yourself when we are around the Robsons. Henry and I will not be separated, and I might be able to convince your brother to let you stay."

"But will you be able to convince him to let me...?" The younger woman broke off, her eyes gleaming. She smiled smugly and took her seat. "Never mind."

Eleanor knew mischief when she saw it; she was the mother of a five-year-old boy after all. But, what was Portia thinking? What did she want most? At present, to marry Mr. Semple.

Of course. Now the girl thought she had leverage.

"Be careful," she warned. "You tread a dangerous path if you try to manipulate Octavius."

Portia laughed, a chilling nonchalance in her voice. "Pish. At last I have the upper hand over my brother. Do you know how long I have waited to be in this position? Being the meek, obedient sister year after year is tiresome. I am so glad I decided to come to London. If Octavius wants me to behave, then he will give his permission for me to marry Mr. Semple."

Eleanor sighed. "He will just send you away."

"It is time he realizes how grown up I am."

Grown up? The girl reeked of immaturity. Eleanor pressed two fingers to her temple. The ache in her head expanded, and the mustard-colored walls compounded the pain. This scheming girl before her was not at all like the girl she'd visited in Somerset. She did not want to live her life playing these spiteful, dishonest games. She simply wanted her quiet existence with Henry.

"Perhaps we could discuss this again in the morning. We might each have a different perspective then. One thing for you to think about, though... I like Mrs. Robson, and I would appreciate you not offending her."

Portia shrugged and bent over the handkerchief she was working on. "Very well."

Eleanor ignored the book lying next to her and leaned back, closing her eyes. Maybe in the morning she'd wake from this nightmare.

Lex stayed at the arsenal for hours, long even after Robson and Collett left. How could he face Portia—now demoted to half-sister—over dinner? He couldn't, so he proceeded to his club, where he ate very little of his roasted beef and drank more brandy than he was accustomed to. When his thoughts turned to Eleanor, a charming, sensual version of Eleanor who smiled freely and lounged upon the bed with her chemise hiked up to her thighs and her breasts threatening to spill out of her bodice, he knew for certain he'd drunk too much. He decided to return to the house and sleep off his inebriation before once more sneaking out of the house in the morning.

The footman let him in, and he climbed to the first floor, intent on heading straight to his bedchamber. However, the sitting room door stood open, a large swathe of light cast into the corridor. A rumble of voices drifted out.

He walked—lightly—to the door and peered in. Portia sat on one of the chairs at an angle toward the fire. Lex couldn't see Eleanor, but she must be sitting on the high-backed settle for he heard her say, "This room leaves so much to be desired. If it is meant to torture, it quite fulfills its function."

His wife went on, deriding the comfort of the chairs and the color of the walls—among other things. But Lex's eye was drawn to his sister in profile. She leaned forward a little, casting more firelight on her embroidery piece. Now that he knew the full truth of his mother's perfidy, he could see Portia's resemblance to William Drummond so clearly. They were alike not just in their matching eye color, but in the shape of their faces and slight roundedness of their noses.

How would she react if she knew the truth of her parentage? Should he tell her? Would she hate him even more for destroying the definition of who she was?

That last didn't matter, he supposed. He deserved her hatred. He'd abandoned her when she had no one else. He'd left her isolated in Somerset. But, what had his choice been—allow her to be raised by another madman, himself? She would have been no

better off. Her hatred was inevitable. What surprised him was how long the ugly emotion had taken to rise to the top. In Somerset, she'd always been polite if diffident.

"I would love to see you do something with this room," Portia was saying with a petulant lift of her lips, "but I'm sure Lex would never allow it. I wonder if he even knows how to say the word 'yes.'"

How could he possibly tell her about her father when she was so overset about Mr. Semple? He would not risk her succumbing to a bout of self-loathing over her parentage. He'd once tried to protect her, on that dark day their—no, *his*—father died. He must do so again.

"Octavius."

He blinked, finally remarking Eleanor, who had risen from the settle and noted his lurking presence. Now Portia stared at him too. He was absolutely *not* skilled at avoiding people he didn't want to see. Not when they lived in his house, anyway, which was exactly why he didn't want them here in the first place. Perhaps he could become his own hermit; that might afford him some privacy.

He bowed. "Good evening. I just returned and was on my way upstairs to retire."

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, for of course if he were on his way upstairs there would be no need to detour to the sitting room. Despite her skepticism, she looked wan, which was odd considering how close to the fire she sat.

God, the brandy was making him mawkish.

The two of them were still staring, neither saying a word. Very well. "Good night then." He turned to go but then didn't, raising his arm in an arc to indicate the sitting room. "Yes. Change anything in here you'd like. You may have use of the household accounts."

Without another word, he spun on his heel and stalked off, leaving his sister wide-eyed and his wife with her mouth hanging open. Fickle females. They would no doubt find fault with his acquiescence too.

After performing his nightly ablutions and donning his banyan, Lex entered his bedchamber. The room was almost dark, with only one small branch of candles lit in the far corner. The bed curtains were pulled back, and in the dim light he saw a smallish lump in the middle of the mattress.

For the love of St. Bartholomew.

Lex strode over and sat down heavily. The lump stirred, yawned, and opened its eyes.

“Sir?”

“Your bed is in the nursery.” The words didn’t come out quite as gruffly as he’d hoped. Must be because he was half-foxed.

“I like this bed,” the boy said, sitting up.

Lex pinned him with a hard look. “It isn’t your bed. Children sleep in the nursery. Do you not do so at Mayne Castle?”

Henry nodded then stretched his arms above his head, clearly unmoved by Lex’s glare. At least there was one Mayne male who didn’t seem to have raving hot blood rushing through his veins. Thank God for small favors?

Lex leaned closer, trying to summon a snarl or a scowl, but with those rosy cheeks and heavy-lidded eyes it was like trying to glower at a kitten. He rose and stalked a few feet away, breathing deeply.

“Return to your bed. Now.” He hadn’t yelled, exactly, but his voice was harsher. Better.

“I’d rather not.”

“It’s my bed!” Lex swiped a hand across his brow. It had come to this: arguing with a child about sleeping arrangements.

Said child twisted the sheet in his fists. “I’m sure Mama wouldn’t mind if you shared her bed.”

Never in a thousand nights would Eleanor agree to that again.

Lex rolled his shoulders, wondering where he could gain the knowledge to deal with this small boy. He had no model to look back on, to guide him. He excelled at business, not childrearing.

Father was one of the best—some days. On others he was a nightmare come to life. And then he died.

He didn’t die. He killed himself. Chose to leave this world. And me.

Lex muttered a curse and turned back to the boy. Business was life. Life was business. “I will give you two crowns if you’ll return to your own bed.”

The child’s small eyebrows rose, so maybe now they were speaking the same language. Then a frown creased the boy’s forehead.

“I don’t want two crowns.”

No. Too much to hope his own flesh and blood would possess the same passion for business.

Henry bounced a little where he sat on the bed, suddenly more alert. “However, I will leave if...if you’ll take me to the park. And

I'll take one crown. I need more soldiers."

Well. The boy just might have the skills of a negotiator after all. But Lex wasn't known around the club as the Tradesman Earl for nothing.

"The footman can accompany you to the park again, and I'll buy you all the toys and soldiers you want."

The boy's counteroffer was swift and resolute. "A half crown, and *you* take me to the park."

Lex did not want to take Henry anywhere, but he wasn't going to give up his bed to the little tyrant. And if he agreed to the deal, he would have to honor it; once he made a promise in business, he kept it.

The two stared at each other, Henry waiting for an answer, Lex waiting for the rage to uncoil in his chest. He wasn't angry, though. Not exactly. Annoyed, yes, but this tightness in his chest, it was actually something else. This boy—Henry—

He looked away, nodding sharply. "Very well. I agree to your terms."

Henry leapt off the bed. His small bare feet padded across the floor, taking him right toward Eleanor's bedchamber.

"Where are you going?"

"To Mama's room. I like the bed in there too. Goodnight, sir." Nightdress floating around him as if he were a wraith, the child slipped through the door and disappeared.

Lex collapsed onto the bed. What had he got himself into?

A hinge squeaked. "Er, sir?"

"Yes?"

"I can't get up onto the bed. Could you help me?"

Lex lay still. There were numerous small islands in the Hebrides. Perhaps he could purchase one and settle there, all alone in the peace and quiet.

He levered himself upright and snatched the child with one arm, tucking him up like a sack of potatoes. Henry yelped with what sounded like...delight? So as they crossed the threshold Lex said, "You realize I could just haul you upstairs and put you in the nursery where you belong?"

Not that he had any intention of returning to that room. Once in the last ten years was enough.

Henry didn't take him in earnest. The child just laughed and squirmed as he was carried into the other room.

Lex stopped before the mahogany bed. It was large, especially so from a child's view, but surely the boy could have climbed up? Surely he had done so that first night, so now Lex suspected he'd been taken by the youth in more than just the previous negotiation.

He righted the boy, grasping him beneath the arms, then tossed him into the air. Henry spread his arms and legs wide, landing on his back with a soft whoosh in the middle of the white counterpane, popped up and rushed back at Lex, his arms outstretched and his grin just as wide.

"Again!"

Lex had no choice but to catch him, otherwise he would have thudded to the floor. Intent on scolding the boy, he hoisted him up to eye level and found himself once more incapable. Just like the child's sleepy face, this joyful one eviscerated his surliness. He launched Henry back toward the bed with a growled, "Last time."

"That was excellent fun. Thank you, sir." Henry crawled toward the pillows and slipped beneath the covers. "May we go to the park tomorrow?"

Lex turned away and began to extinguish the candles. "I have to meet with Mr. Robson tomorrow."

"Oh."

Damnation. Those endearing expressions, the disappointed tone... Was there anything about a child that didn't render one a prattling ninny? Lex grumbled, "The day after tomorrow. Ten o'clock."

Henry nodded, smiling once more. "Excellent, sir. Goodnight then."

Lex let out a soul-rattling sigh. Goodnight."

Escape at last. Except, there was no reprieve. At that exact moment, his wife came through her dressing room door.



"WHAT ARE YOU DOING here?" Eleanor's head throbbed more painfully at the sight of Octavius. She wanted to crawl into bed and somehow get to sleep in spite of her headache; she did not want to contend with his harshness, his pettiness, his...Octaviusness.

A glance at the bed showed they weren't alone. As much as she loved Henry, she didn't think she could allow him to sleep with her tonight. She was in too much agony.

"I," began Octavius, "was just leaving."

Eleanor tightened the belt of her flannel wrapper and crossed her arms over her belly. "Would you mind taking Henry to the nursery?" She turned to her son, to explain, only to find his brow furrowed mulishly. That didn't bode well.

"Henry..." The aching of her head intensified, and she grimaced.

Octavius moved back toward his bedchamber. "The boy is sleeping here tonight."

"Yes, Mama, I am."

Goodness, they sounded just alike. Authoritarian and used to getting their way.

"The earl and I made a deal."

What? She must have misheard. Before she could ask Henry to repeat himself, however, another spear of pain gripped her and she reached a hand to her head, wincing.

"Eleanor, what is the matter with you?"

Her infirm mind must be playing tricks because Octavius didn't sound as irritated as before. She took several deep breaths, trying to ease the throbbing.

"Eleanor?"

Closing her eyes, she shook her head.

"Colonel, sleep well," Octavius said to their son. Beyond her eyelids, the room went dark, then suddenly Octavius took her elbow and steered her to his room. "You are worrying Henry."

Just Henry? Through the haze of pain it sounded as if, just possibly, her husband was a little worried, too. She must be hallucinating now.

She breathed once, gathering herself. "I'm sorry. My monthly courses have begun and I have an excruciating headache."

Her husband's brow furrowed. "Do you often get a megrim during this time?"

"Yes," she snapped. "But take relief in the fact that I'm not pregnant with your child again. Now, if you'll excuse me, I really must lie down. Please carry Henry to the nursery so that I may sleep undisturbed."

Octavius glanced at the connecting door, an odd expression on his face. "I can't. We will sleep in here—though you need not worry I'll touch you."

She swayed slightly. "Octavius, I am not lying. I really must sleep."

"I am not thick-headed, Eleanor. I said I would leave you alone."

The bedclothes were very rumpled, and Eleanor knew that had significance, but her head ached too much to think more on it. She could no longer stand, either. She trudged to the enormous bed and pulled off her wrapper. Then, slipping between the linens, she lay gently on her side and rested her pulsating head on the pillow.

“Can I get you something? Tea? Laudanum?”

Her husband, solicitous? She must be asleep and dreaming already. She popped an eye open to find him standing in front of her, his pantaloons-clad manly parts right in her line of vision. So she closed her eye. “No, thank you.”

“What about brandy?”

His voice was nearer. She opened both eyes. He was crouched in front of her. He wasn’t scowling, but his face was set in a sober expression of...what? Was this what concern looked like on Octavius?

“Even if you get me drunk, I won’t throw myself at you again.”

His lips bowed for just the barest of seconds. “That’s unfortunate.”

Was *he* drunk? Did she smell spirits on him? She was most definitely delirious with pain, so she closed her eyes. She heard him move away and then a door swished open. Minutes passed as she evened her breathing and tried to will the pain away.

“Eleanor.” Her name whispered past her ear. She couldn’t ever recall Octavius speaking in such a low voice. “Try some brandy. Just a bit, perhaps?”

She lifted herself up on one elbow and sipped the amber liquid. He watched, his dark eyes not brittle like tree bark but smooth like morning chocolate. Everything was so wrong. Octavius being helpful, calm, *not* scowling. This was the side of him she’d always feared, the side she never wanted to see. This Octavius, with the concerned frown and attentive behavior, was the one she could easily fall for. But after their rocky beginning she could never trust it.

After one more drink, she back handed the glass. “Why are you being so kind?”

“You look wretched,” he said softly.

He didn’t mean it as an insult, but she *had* to be insulted. She needed the old Octavius back. She needed to protect herself. “Of course, you can’t have me looking wretched for the Robsons. A haggard wife is not a happy wife.”

He blinked rapidly. "Ex...exactly." He placed the brandy glass on the side table and rose, walking toward the corner of the room. "We must keep up appearances."

The room plunged into darkness as he extinguished the last candle on the candelabra, and Eleanor rolled to her back and closed her eyes, grateful that the pain helped her black out the expression she'd seen on his face. It looked suspiciously as if she'd hurt his feelings. But Octavius didn't have feelings.

Except, when he wasn't with her, she was always wishing he did possess them. Now he was showing signs of sensitivity and...

Her brain began to hurt.

The mattress shifted. "Did the brandy help?"

The pounding in her head had lessened. If she could just stop thinking about him, it might not hurt at all. "Yes, thank you."

She felt him roll to his side, facing her. "Can I do anything else...to ease the pain?"

Oh, God help her. She clamped her lips shut. Not another word. She would say nothing, he would think she was ignoring him, he'd become hostile again, and all would be well in her life.

The room grew dreadfully silent. She couldn't even hear him breathing. Was he holding his breath as she was? The rigid manner in which she waited was not helping her headache.

Please, let him turn the other way.

A whispery caress grazed her forehead. In surprise, she let out the breath she had stifled. Warm fingers slid over her temple, smoothing her hair back once, twice, three times. Then a pair of fingers smoothed over her eyebrows, first the left and then the right. Next, a thumb trailed down one side of her nose and across her cheek, and then the motion repeated on the other side. She dared not open her eyes.

The soothing strokes began again. Same pattern: forehead, eyebrows, nose, cheeks. The pads of Lex's fingers were slightly ridged, but the gentle tracing over her skin lulled her into a drowsy haze. In the back of her mind a faint voice prodded her to swat away his hand, but she didn't have the energy or the inclination. The pain in her head receded, drawn away by his feathery touch.

What more could she ask for? Eleanor succumbed to the call of Morpheus.



SHE WOKE THE NEXT MORNING. Octavius had sat up and levered himself off the bed. She rubbed her eyes and then opened them to find him looking at her. He stood shirtless. The sight of all that bare skin distracted her from the awkwardness she should be feeling after last night. Whatever her husband did with his days, his activities kept his muscles in sleek, hard, prime form. Her gaze dropped to the waistband of his pantaloons and she searched for that elusive scar.

“Eleanor,” he rasped. “Stop looking at me like that.”

Oh, was she embarrassing him with her whorish ogling? Cheeks burning, she looked away.

He cleared his throat. “I’ll be at the arsenal all day with Mr. Robson. Have you something planned with his wife?”

Oh dear. “As a matter of fact, we are all to attend a soiree tonight. You will need to return home by seven.”

Lex’s response was a growl of dissatisfaction. *Excellent.* This was the irritated husband she needed. If she must live with him, he had to be the big, bad ogre. Not the compassionate man from the night before.

She blinked up at him. “Mrs. Robson is keen to go.”

That earned a grunt—she assumed of acquiescence—as he snatched up his banyan and pulled it on. A little mewl of disappointment threatened to escape her lips.

“Seven o’clock, you say?”

Sitting up, Eleanor tucked the counterpane beneath her arms. “Yes. That should give you time to bathe and change.” She traced the coverlet’s silver embroidery. “Portia and I will be ready by half past eight.”

“No. Not Portia.”

Eleanor tipped her head up. “Mrs. Robson wishes her to attend.”

Lex cocked an eyebrow, as if to say *I cannot believe you are using that argument again*, and she couldn’t help but grin with pleasure. He shook his head—in an affectionate way? No, a shake of the head couldn’t be affectionate. How ridiculous.

“Portia had better be on her best behavior. I am in possession of a small estate near the Scottish border,” Lex warned. Eleanor wasn’t sure if it was a threat or a jest, but she sobered instantly, thinking of Portia’s devious air the night before. Regardless of her brother’s intention, it would be a threat when Eleanor spoke to her.

She nodded, expecting Lex to leave. Instead, he stayed and a

strangled silence fell between them. At last he asked, "How are you this morning?"

Her cheeks heated. "Much better. I...I...thank you."

Her gratitude choked the remaining air out of the room. "Right. Well. Good. I will see you this evening then."

He was gone before she could make the inanest of replies. Eleanor collapsed back on the mattress, praying for the perseverance to get through the day, especially that evening. That's all she asked for: strength for the day. Tomorrow, she would worry about tomorrow.

Henry burst in through Eleanor's bedchamber door and jumped onto the mattress beside her. "Good morning, Mama!"

She smiled at her son and planted a kiss on his forehead. "How are you, sweet pea?"

"The earl calls me Colonel. I like that better than sweet pea."

He would. He was growing up much too quickly for her liking, especially considering there would be no siblings to follow after him.

"I promise to only call you sweet pea in private. Is that all right?"

Henry nodded vigorously. "The earl is going to take me to the park tomorrow."

Of course Octavius wasn't going to take his son to the park. Was Henry imagining things he wished to be true? Dear God, this was a complication Eleanor had never considered.

She slipped a hand up to cradle the boy's cheek. "Sweet pea, I know you'd like your father to take you to the park, but he's very busy with Mr. Robson and I'm sure he won't have time. Why don't Portia and I accompany you instead?"

"You can come if you'd like, but the earl promised to take me tomorrow at ten o'clock in the morning."

"He did?"

More emphatic nodding, which knocked her hand away from his face. "I should have brought my hoop and stick. I'm hungry."

Henry popped off the bed and swept her a gallant bow. Then he too was gone.

So. Eleanor's son was possibly delusional, Portia would soon be in full rebellion, and her husband might have a tender, considerate side she couldn't bear to imagine. She threw off the bed linens and stood up.

Entertaining the Robsons was going to be the easy part of this madcap scheme.



Chapter Eleven



Lex's day proved cathartic. He and Robson found a rhythm to their work: The American paced and measured the floor, periodically returning to the drafting table to share his plans with Lex, who would then draw—or redraw—the arsenal's specifications while Robson went back to plotting and arranging. This pattern repeated itself throughout the day, and there were, blessedly, no interruptions from overwrought sisters, arrogant cuckolders, inquisitive children, or beautiful and vulnerable wives.

Robson's experience was a godsend. Currently, England's rifle manufacturing process was scattered and inefficient. The various pieces—lock, stock, barrel—were made by individuals and then shipped to a central location for assembly. There was no uniformity, and the number of rifles produced was not nearly adequate to supply the army fighting the French. By following the American example of producing and assembling all the pieces in one place, Lex hoped to win the government contract with the sheer number of rifles his arsenal could manufacture.

Alas, the day of purposeful work ended all too quickly. Lex was soon riding back to Hereford Street and to those very people he'd missed not a jot. Especially Eleanor. Last night, besieged by pain, she'd brought him low, made him feel...not sorry for her, no, but *concerned* for her. Of course, concern was precariously close to caring and made him do unnatural things.

He guided his horse down busy Park Lane, only half his mind on navigating the traffic. The other half turned to the problem of Portia. Robson had asked Lex if he'd talked to his sister yet, but of course he hadn't. He'd already refused his permission for her to marry. Wasn't that enough?

Clearly not, if his sister had shown up on his doorstep, begging

him to change his mind. Or perhaps he should substitute “browbeating” for “begging.”

Ah well, he would enlist Eleanor’s assistance, as suggested by Robson. And at least, now that he’d decided for sure, he didn’t have to tell Portia she was the product of the unholy union of the Countess of Lexden and Robert Drummond.

His gelding stopped, and Lex looked up to find himself in front of his house. He dismounted and handed the reins to the groom, and in the entrance hall, he handed over his hat and gloves to Bickley. He half expected one or more of his irksome family members to accost him then and there. But no one came.

“I need a bath sent up, Bickley.”

“The bath awaits, my lord.” The butler’s nose rose a notch. “Her ladyship ordered it.”

Interesting. Lex rather appreciated his wife’s forethought.

Upstairs, he stripped off his clothes and sank into the steaming water in the elongated bath. No hip bath for him; he found them too small and uncomfortable, so he’d ordered a larger tub made many years ago.

His valet handed him a bar of soap. “Do you require anything else, sir?”

Lex began scrubbing his arm. “Send her ladyship to me.”

A soft gasp was emitted by his manservant, but Lex ignored it. Scandalous or not, he needed to speak with Eleanor. Now.

He was covered in soap when his wife stepped just inside the door. She came no farther.

“You weren’t so missish this morning,” he said, rinsing off his shoulders. Perhaps his request for assistance would be better received if he followed Robson’s example and started off with a tease. “Come, Eleanor, look your fill.”

“Octavius...”

Apparently, teasing wasn’t his forte. He was surprised his name got past her clenched jaw.

“Sit.” He waved at the chair nearest the tub and resumed lathering, intently inspecting the areas he soaped. “We must talk about Portia.”

The fire crackled, and the water lapped against the side of the bath. He didn’t hear Eleanor moving. His resolve not to look her way lasted no more than a half minute, and when he turned, he saw that she still stood, arms crossed beneath her breasts, feet spread

wide. She hadn't donned her gown for the evening and was cinched into a wrapper with her chemise peeking out beneath. Her hair, which hadn't been dressed yet, glistened in the candlelight as if just washed.

Her eyes, a snappish brown, bored into him. *Damnation*. Her ire was darkly arousing.

He turned his attention to cleaning his fingernails. That's when she stomped over to the tub and snatched the soap from his hands. She scrubbed the bar against her hands, dropped it back into the water, and plunged her fingers into his hair.

"What—?"

"Portia. You wished to speak of her." The force with which she attacked his head softened, and Lex nearly shivered at the light caresses now skimming across his scalp. Eleanor went on, "She is still going to the rout tonight."

"Yes. Of course."

Even if he had changed his mind about that, he doubted he could have formed the word *no*. Not when Eleanor's thumbs applied gentle pressure up and down the sides of his neck. Nor when she swirled her fingers around his ears.

"What did you want to say about your sister then?"

Her mouth right next to his ear, her breath fluttered across his cheek. Lex swallowed, trying to think of what he'd wanted to say. Her hair hung like a curtain dusting his shoulder, its heady lavender scent making his head spin. Just ten minutes ago, he'd been in possession of a free will.

Warm water sluiced over his head as Eleanor rinsed the soap from his hair with a nearby jug. Lex closed his eyes and dropped his chin to his chest. Vaguely, he heard the jug being replaced on the table. Then Eleanor was leaning over him, her flannel-covered breasts pushing into his upper back while her hand plunged into the water, which excited his cock. However, she simply retrieved the soap and backed away.

She pushed at his shoulder blades, urging him forward. He pulled his knees up and slipped his arms around them, bent in half. Her hands, covered in suds, slid over his back. Down his sides. He locked his muscles, ready for her incorrigible tickling. He should have known better than to think Eleanor predictable. Her hands ran wild. Over the upper part of his buttocks. Halfway down his thighs. With a splash, back up and around his chest, her palms scraping

over his nipples then smoothing over his ribs and plunging down toward his stiff cock.

This was diabolical torture.

Lex jumped up, breaking free of her enthralling grip, heedless of the aroused state of his body. He grabbed a towel, sloshing water everywhere, and with the grace of an ox climbed out of the bath and stumbled toward his dressing room. He stole a brief look at Eleanor, but she was a whorl of flashing green eyes, tousled hair, and soaking sleeves. Whatever her intent, she'd turned the tables on him quite thoroughly.

He ducked into his dressing room, trying to catch his breath and dry off. Her laugh, spirited and lively, drifted through the door, weaving in and around and through him.

Hellfire. She had no business worming her way inside him like this. She had betrayed him. And if she hadn't, he might soften toward her. Then there was the chance *she* might come to care for him. He couldn't let anyone do that. He was already halfway down the path of instability and insanity, the same path trodden by his father, the path that ended in self-destruction. And, though it was called *self*-destruction, in truth, all those around a person were destroyed.

He'd been on the brink of sending Eleanor away six years ago for this very reason. Then he'd discovered—or so he thought—that she was carrying Drummond's child. The perfect excuse to end their budding relationship before he destroyed them both.

Lex swiped his towel across his shoulders one final time then pulled on his banyan, all the while hardening the ice in his veins, forcing out his wife's sweet laughter. Then he yanked open the door and stalked back into his bedchamber.

Eleanor stood by the fire, attempting to dry the sleeves of her wrapper. Vestiges of amusement remained in her eyes, which were now a muted, earthy green. So inviting, as if to say, *Come, let me shelter you. I mean you no harm.*

The harm had already been done. Eleanor had hurt him. Just as his father had hurt him with his erratic warm-one-minute, blisteringly-angry-the-next-minute behavior. Just as his mother had hurt his father with her infidelity. It was a never-ending cycle.

He nearly snarled. "I must speak with Portia and tell her—yet again—she will not be marrying Mr. Semple. You will accompany me." He flashed an angry glare at his wife. "And you will support

my decision.”

“No!” Eleanor’s vehemence seemed to startle even her. She sucked in a breath before continuing. “Leaving aside the wisdom of your decision for the moment, I must tell you that now is not the time to provoke your sister.”

“Provoke her? I do nothing of the kind. I’m only restating my decision. She may not marry Semple.”

The welcoming warmth had disappeared from Eleanor’s eyes.

Good.

“She’s set her mind on marrying him, and she’s vowed to do whatever it takes to be his wife.”

Lex sighed. “Then it is a good thing she is here and he is in Somerset.”

Eleanor shook her head. “You don’t understand.”

“There is nothing to understand.” Lex shrugged. “She is not going to marry him, and I have no qualms about telling her so.”

His wife came forward, skirting the tub, hands held out in placation. He had a difficult time keeping his feet rooted to the carpet as she approached. As it was, he could barely concentrate on her words.

“Please, Octavius. Not tonight. She’s ready to rebel. She says she will make trouble with the Robsons if you don’t let her marry Semple. If you could just let the subject lie for now, I might be able to settle her down.”

“There is no need to avoid the subject. I am not going to change my mind. Portia may be stubborn, but she’s not foolhardy enough to gainsay me.”

“*You* are the stubborn ass,” Eleanor ground out.

“He’s up the River Tick!” Lex replied, retreating to the far side of the room. He picked up a comb from the commode and ran it through his hair. “He gambles, Eleanor. Not on cards, but on horse races and boxing matches. Every week on his day off. He barely has tuppence to rub together. He will not get his hands on my sister or her dowry.”

Silence. Just as he’d wanted. No, needed.

“I’m not questioning your decision. However, if you could just let her enjoy the soiree tonight—”

“I must dress.” Lex tossed down his comb and moved toward the dressing room. “You and Portia will meet me in the sitting room in three quarters of an hour.”

There was no sound more blessed than that of the latch catching, the door closed on Eleanor and her incessant opposition to everything he said.



PRESENTABLE AT LAST, Lex strolled into the sitting room at half past eight. Portia and Eleanor were already there, one smiling, the other glum. Was Eleanor suffering a megrim again, or was she still upset with his decision? Why couldn't she see that he must deny Portia?

More importantly, why did he care?

"Good evening, brother."

He tilted his head in Portia's direction, his breath hitching. Now that he knew, he couldn't look at her without seeing the resemblance to Drummond, driving the nail of betrayal deeper and deeper—where it had to remain hidden.

"You look lovely," he said. It was the expected comment, but no less true. His sister was a pretty slip of a girl.

She grinned and spun so that the skirts of her white dress billowed into a perfect circle. "Thank you. We found this on our shopping trip yesterday." Those damnable Drummond eyes gleamed. "And Eleanor ordered a gown for the ball."

Distraction. Robson had suggested he distract her from the disappointment of not marrying Semple, but... Lex glanced at Eleanor, who cocked an eyebrow as if to say, *Do carry on with your brilliant plan.* Meek and biddable, his wife was not.

He went to the side cabinet and reached for the brandy. "Would either of you like a drink?"

"I need some sherry," Eleanor said pointedly.

Portia shook her head.

Lex carried a glass of sherry over to Eleanor. He dropped his voice so that Portia, who was fiddling with her gloves across the room, wouldn't hear. "Has the headache returned?"

She snatched her drink. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" He could still smell her lavender soap.

"Pretending you are concerned. The Robsons aren't here."

She wouldn't look at him. She was flustered.

He leaned close, his lips nearly brushing her temple. "The scent of your hair has addled my brain."

She drew in a shuddering breath, scrambling whatever wits he

had left. Caught up in the moment, he turned his head a fraction and pressed his lips to her hairline. She tilted her head back, so he set to kissing his way to her mouth. Closer and closer—

“Eleanor! I need help with my glove,” Portia said, her tone harsh. “Are we not ready to leave?”

Lex stepped back. What the hell was wrong with him? He was addled indeed. He’d been about to seduce Eleanor in front of his sister. Not only that, he’d shown concern for her. Again.

Brain still muddled, he turned to Portia and said, “I will not give my permission for you to marry Mr. Semple.” As usual, his words came out harsher than he intended, so he took a quick breath and tried to sound more reasonable. “I know this decision will disappoint you, but it is for the best. I’m willing, however, to allow you to remain in Town with Eleanor and me so that you may attend the ball in a few weeks’ time.”

Portia looked ready to stomp her foot. “You are such a beast!” She jerked her gloved hand away from Eleanor. “You had better allow me to marry Mr. Semple, or I will make things difficult for you with the Robsons.”

Lex blanched, and a triumphant smile appeared on Portia that nearly made him choke. Though Eleanor had tried to warn him, he hadn’t expected this from his sister. Why? Because he hadn’t known she was aware of the charade he’d undertaken. How could she know the leverage she might effect—?

He swung a narrowed gaze to Eleanor.

She threw up her hands. “You would blame *me* for this? She’s always been well aware of the discordant nature of our marriage, Octavius. She knew something was afoot the moment she arrived.”

Eleanor was right on every count, but Lex wasn’t about to admit it. He’d spent the last six years blaming his wife for almost everything. It was easier.

It’s also unfair. She isn’t a punching bag at Gentleman Jackson’s.

Portia smirked and grabbed her reticule. “We don’t want to keep the Robsons waiting, do we, brother? Let’s be off. We can discuss the calling of the banns in the carriage.”

“You are not marrying Semple,” Lex bellowed. “And you are damn fortunate I don’t lock you in your room for all eternity.”

Portia’s victorious humor vanished. “I will be twenty-one in a few months. I won’t need your permission to marry then.”

Lex blew out a breath like a bull ready to charge. But Eleanor

stepped in front of him.

"I know this is difficult, Portia, but rash plans will solve nothing. Your brother controls your dowry. If you marry without his consent, your husband will not receive the funds. Octavius was concerned about you, fearful you would fall prey to a fortune hunter, so he checked into Mr. Semple's finances. And..." She took a step and placed a hand on Portia's arm. "I fear he will not marry you without your dowry, darling. He's in dire need of money."

Portia's lower lip trembled and tears filled her eyes. Lex blinked. Was there an emotion his sister hadn't experienced in the last twenty minutes?

She flicked her hand toward him but addressed Eleanor. "You've taken his part! How can you?"

A question Lex would like the answer to, himself.

He scraped his hand over his jaw. What a disaster. Eleanor had been right: This was not the time to talk to Portia, and not the manner in which to deal with her, either. The longcase clock began to toll. They were late.

Eleanor produced a handkerchief and dotted away Portia's tears. "We only want the best for you. Now, I know this has been trying, so why don't you decide what you want to do. Would you like to forget about Mr. Semple for the evening and enjoy the soiree, or would you rather remain here?"

Such patience, Lex thought admiringly. Did all mothers have such a deep wellspring, or was this just a natural part of his wife? His own mother had certainly shown none.

Portia sniffed. She raised her chin to stare at him over Eleanor's shoulder and said, "I would like to go to the rout."

Lex didn't like that tiny glimmer in the back of her eyes. "If you —"

"Good." Eleanor spoke over him. "I think you'll have a splendid time." She pressed her handkerchief into Portia's hands. "Do remember, though, that we expect you to show respect for Mr. and Mrs. Robson. You are a grown woman of twenty, Portia, and it would be a shame if you had to be packed off to the country again—your brother's estate near Scotland, to be more specific, not to Somerset and Mr. Semple."

Portia nodded. Directing one last hateful glare at him, she stepped into the entrance hall.

"I was about to say much the same thing," Lex remarked in

surprise.

Eleanor turned, humor lighting her eyes. "Were you now?"

He shrugged, not quite able to smile. "Essentially. Though I may have used a more severe tone."

His wife tipped her head back and laughed. "I have no idea what you mean. You're usually brimming with gentleness and compassion."

There was a growing heat in his cheeks, yet Lex didn't feel as awkward as before. She was definitely teasing him. He smiled back.

Eleanor looked down, adjusting her skirts. "We should be going."

Annoyance flared up. Why would she cut short this moment of unity? Just as quickly he realized he had discomposed her—with his smile? "You look wonderful, by the way. That gown makes your eyes shimmer like a new penny."

His words drew her gaze again. "It's the same dress I wore the other night."

Lex put his hand on her back and guided her from the room. "I know. I believe I complimented you on it then as well. Enchanting. Wasn't that the word I used?"



Chapter Twelve



Eleanor donned her pelisse and grabbed her reticule without any thought, as if a puppeteer controlled her. She followed Portia out to the carriage in the same way. Two words and one image crowded her brain, allowing room for nothing else.

Octavius smiled.

And the image—his bitter face transformed! He'd looked years younger and...more, well, human than she'd ever seen him. All this after that huge row with his sister, on a night when they had to parade their charade of a marriage before the *ton*. Octavius had *smiled*. Because Eleanor teased him. The tiniest ball of warmth sprouted in her belly and spread throughout her body.

The carriage hit a dip and Portia crashed into her. The girl mumbled an apology and then resumed her silent survey of the passing city. Eleanor said nothing.

Octavius was watching her. Watching as Henry sometimes observed frogs at the pond—with trepidation, unsure of the creature's next hop. Her husband's scrutiny threatened to push that budding warmth in her stomach all the way up to her cheeks, so Eleanor strove to slow her heartbeat and maintain her equanimity.

It was difficult. Besides the smile, he'd complimented her. She wasn't the silly young girl she'd once been, eager to collect any scrap of flattery she could, but still... Who didn't like to hear nice comments sincerely offered? She drew in a further steadying breath then made the mistake of glancing across the carriage again. Octavius filled a large portion of the bench, his grey-clad thighs stretched wide. Those brown eyes, which had lost a fraction of their hardness over the last few days, were still upon her.

Dear Lord. Even at his harshest, she'd always stupidly hungered for her husband. Now? Now that he sat there looking... unmonster-

like? Now that there was a speck of heat in those eyes...? She had to get away from him. He was too changeable to trust.

The carriage rolled to a stop in front of Grillion's Hotel. The Robsons would join them soon, and they would all travel together.

Portia huffed out a burdened sigh. When Octavius stiffened and turned a gimlet eye on her, Eleanor's plan increased: She had to get herself away from Octavius *and* split up the siblings. Or at least reconcile them.

Octavius cared for Portia, at least a little bit. She had glimpsed it earlier, when he'd insisted Semple wasn't good enough. He simply didn't know how to relate to his sister, how to show her what he felt. And while mediating between the two should feel like a burden, Eleanor didn't mind the role. The siblings were both so alone, so isolated from the world. If she could bring them closer together, her time here in London wasn't completely squandered.

The Robsons clambered in, and whereas the carriage had suffered a close, heavy silence for the first half of the journey, the second half knew no silence at all. Justine was as excited as Portia should be, while Mr. Robson turned Octavius into a prattle-box by asking a question about the arsenal. This unexpected animation—another sign of her husband's humanness—left Eleanor a bit breathless, and out of necessity she turned back to the ladies in time to hear Portia at last respond to Justine's enthusiasm.

Tonight could be fun, Eleanor allowed. She had the camaraderie of Justine and the chance to introduce Portia to the delights of Society. Her breath came easier.

Then Octavius secured her hand and helped her down from the carriage. His grip was strong, and as her slippers hit the pavement, he pulled her close.

"Will you allow me to escort you in to supper later?"

Goodness, with those lowered eyelids and husky voice, he sounded as if he were issuing an invitation to his bed. She didn't know how to respond. Over the last few days, she never knew which Octavius was going to surface: the ogre or the almost-human.

The brazen woman hiding within her wanted to lean into his ear and whisper, *Of course, darling!* Possibly even give that ear a nip before withdrawing. Her rational self wanted to rip her hand away and say scornfully, *You needn't bother. I'm certain I can find someone else.*

In the end, she decided to simply keep him equally off balance.

She smiled, squeezed his hand and replied, "As you wish."

She hooked her arm around Portia's, and the two climbed the steps to the townhouse. Their hostess, Mrs. Ardmore, expressed delighted surprise at receiving the "elusive" Earl of Lexden. Everyone behaved perfectly through the introductions, though Octavius's eye twitched when Mrs. Ardmore addressed Eleanor as Lady Lexden. For the sake of not marring her own enjoyment of the evening, Eleanor chose to ignore it.

The soiree was spread out over four rooms, much how Justine had suggested Eleanor arrange her ball. One room held tables for cards, another was laid out for supper, the third had all the furniture removed to allow for dancing, and the fourth simply held a crush of people talking, gesticulating, and laughing.

Eleanor's party gathered near the threshold of the dancing room. Perfect for her purpose. She widened her eyes at the sight of twirling ladies and gallant gentlemen, and said, "Oh, I can't wait to dance!"

The look of horror on her husband's face almost made her laugh out loud. Just as she'd thought, he had no love of that amusement. In the quiet first months of their marriage, they'd not danced even once together. At the time, her romantic twenty-year-old self had been devastated by the omission, though she made up for it by dancing with others. Now, she was almost afraid he would change his mind.

"Me too," said Portia, more animated than before. That, too, was perfect. Dancing with other gentlemen would take her mind off Mr. Semple.

"However," Eleanor with the tiniest hint of wistfulness in her voice, "we should do our social duty and circulate first." She blinked up at Octavius. "Perhaps you and Mr. Robson should see what the card room has to offer before you are obliged to enslave yourselves to our every dancing desire?"

"Excellent idea." He clutched at the suggestion like a lifeline.

Mr. Robson lifted an eyebrow in his wife's direction, and Justine smiled teasingly. "Have fun with your cards, but don't blame us if, in your absence, we are swept off our feet by dashing lords."

Her husband winked and turned to leave. Octavius simply gave a stiff nod.

After they were gone, Eleanor dragged in a refreshing breath. "Well, ladies, I'm not certain I'm acquainted with anyone here, but

let's plunge in and see what happens."

The three women linked arms and set off on a stroll around a room where everyone seemed to know each other. Even before her hasty marriage and subsequent six-year absence, Eleanor hadn't exactly moved in the upper echelons of the *ton*. Her family had been too poor and insignificant to merit invitations such as this, so she wasn't quite as confident as her words might sound, but, flanked by Portia and Justine, she wasn't as intimidated as she thought she'd be, either.

They made a tour of the room and then settled in the corner nearest the open entrance to the dancing room. Eleanor and Justine turned a keen eye on their surroundings and began to plan more details of their own affair. Nearby, the crowd shifted and moved, voices rose and fell. No one approached.

After ten minutes, Portia's expression turned mulish. "This isn't —"

At that moment, Mrs. Ardmore bore down on them with a resoundingly beautiful woman by her side. When she'd greeted them earlier, Mrs. Ardmore had shown only the barest of politeness to Eleanor, who was a countess, but a countess of very little consequence. Her smile was almost brittle now.

"Ladies, I do hope you are enjoying yourselves." She turned to the small blonde beside her. "Duchess, may I present Lady Lexden, Lady Portia Mayne, and..." She stared at Justine, concentrating. "Mrs. Robson. Indeed yes."

Eleanor sank into a deep curtsy. Thank goodness Portia and Justine followed suit. A duchess! How...mystifying.

Mrs. Ardmore nodded and continued, "Ladies, the Duchess of Burnham."

Oh. Eleanor shriveled inside. Right now, rather than meet this woman, she would prefer to be clad, in front of all these people, in shift and stays. Anything would be better than standing before the Duchess of Burnham in one of that lady's very own castoffs.

Justine, bless her, spoke over Eleanor's mortified silence. "What a pleasure to meet you, my lady."

Eleanor nearly bit her tongue stifling a groan. The American woman meant well, of course, but the correct address was *Your Grace*. Poor duchess, surrounded by people clearly lacking in sophistication.

Mrs. Ardmore was frowning her disapproval and no doubt

wishing she hadn't included the Earl of Lexden on her guest list when the duchess said, "And you, Mrs. Robson? Are you enjoying the delights of this wonderful soiree?" She was smiling, showing achingly straight white teeth and a graciousness that made Eleanor's heart skip a beat.

The two of them were of a height and obviously had similar figures if they could wear the same dress, but there the comparison ended. The duchess's golden hair was exquisitely arranged in a froth of curls and plaits with tiny crystals woven throughout. Blue eyes shone merrily from a perfectly symmetrical face of flawless pale skin, and pert, bowed lips completed the pretty package. And her dress! Goodness, but it was gorgeous. Ice-blue lutestring shimmered in the candlelight, while a string of glass crystals sewn around the empire waist winked whenever the duchess moved the slightest bit. Eleanor felt cheap and secondhand. Just like the dress she wore.

Justine was explaining how she'd recently arrived from America, and the duchess appeared to be listening. Someone sashayed by and reached out for the arm of Mrs. Ardmore, who left their small group with an unapologetic, "Do excuse me."

Her Grace and Justine chuckled over something. Eleanor should've join the conversation, but she knew nothing about the Duchess of Burnham other than she'd cast off the gown Eleanor now wore.

"Eleanor." Justine squeezed her arm. "The duchess knows the perfect shop from which to order pastries for the ball."

Eleanor found her tongue. "How kind of you to make a recommendation."

"I can do even better." The duchess wagged her eyebrows in a manner so inconsistent with her elegant appearance, Eleanor had to swipe her fingers over her mouth to cover a giggle. "Come to the garden party I'm hosting the day after tomorrow. You can taste the pastries and see for yourself how good they are."

"Oh, th-thank you." Eleanor smiled, though she wasn't certain how much feeling to put into the expression. The duchess *seemed* gracious, but Eleanor was all too conscious of their shared apparel. Was the woman just waiting for the right moment to make a disparaging comment?

"Lady Portia, the invitation includes you as well. I know how bored you young ladies can get with us matrons, but I promise this

garden party will be overflowing with my nieces and all the eligible young gentlemen they can think to invite.”

A spark of excitement flared in Portia’s eyes. Just as quickly it was gone, stamped out by her willfulness. She inclined her head more regally than Eleanor could have imagined and said, “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Justine threw open her fan and waved it so energetically that Eleanor’s hair fluttered. “It’s very close in here. Portia, would you come with me to the refreshments table? I would love a lemonade.”

“I’d prefer ratafia.” The girl seemed set to leave it at that until Eleanor pursed her lips. Then she added, “I’m sure we’ll find both—and perhaps a cheesecake or two.”

“Your Grace? Eleanor?” Justine had cleverly discerned the correct address for the duchess through their conversation.

The duchess asked for lemonade, and Eleanor requested the same. And then they were alone. Which terrified her.

The notes of a rousing reel floated in from the next room, while guests around them chattered as if they were longtime friends. Which undoubtedly they were. A second later, Her Grace leaned in.

“That gown looks a thousand times better on you than it did on me. It is such a beautiful garment. I felt guilty refusing it. You don’t know how happy I am to see you wearing it this evening. It is so much better suited to your coloring.”

Eleanor would have been less astonished if the lady spoke of a ducal estate on the moon.

Her nerves fluttered one last time then settled down. The duchess was just a woman, after all. A gracious and friendly woman much like herself. Yes, a *lot* like herself. Eleanor was a countess, she reminded herself. That detail was so easy to forget, especially when her husband nearly choked every time she was called addressed by her title.

“I am so sorry.” The duchess took a step back on a dainty, crystal-encrusted slipper. “I’m blathering on and saying all manner of inappropriate things.” Her fingers wisped across Eleanor’s wrist. “Do forgive me. I just... I don’t know anyone here, and when I saw you in that dress I thought ‘I’ll have something to talk to her about.’ But of course I shouldn’t have—”

“Duchess, please.” Eleanor took her hand and squeezed. “You’ve been nothing but warm-hearted and kind.” Goodness, she had more in common with this duchess than she ever would have thought. “I,

too, am a stranger to most here. I couldn't be happier to make your acquaintance."

They stood grinning at each in the silliest way until Eleanor couldn't hold back an outright laugh. A few people turned to look, but she didn't care. "I do believe we've just started a Mutual Admiration Society."

The duchess giggled. "I don't know about you, but I am sorely in need of such a membership."

You don't know the half of it.

After a pause, Eleanor decided she could be at least partially honest with her new friend. "I've lived in Essex these last six years, so I am unknown to most of London society. Coming here tonight was at least a trifle less terrifying since I was accompanied by my sister-in-law and Mrs. Robson."

"You are indeed lucky." The duchess lowered her voice. "If you haven't heard already, and you surely will, I'm a bit of...a bit of a scandal."

"Oh, Duchess, that can't be true." She was such a beauty wrapped in a good-natured personality. What could this woman have possibly done? Eleanor didn't want to believe anything negative about someone who had been so nice to her.

Someone jostled the other woman, but Eleanor didn't think that was the source of her grimace.

"Please, may I ask that you not call me Duchess? You see, I'm not supposed to *be* the Duchess of Burnham. And everyone knows it. They practically sneer when they say the word. Call me Alice, if you will."

"Of course, but—"

Luckily Eleanor was spared having to finish that sentence by the return of Justine and Portia, the former handing over two glasses of lemonade. "Here we are! We didn't have enough hands to bring back any tidbits, but Portia and I can attest that the cheesecakes are divine." To this Portia nodded agreeably enough. "And there are strawberries, Eleanor. I highly recommend a trip to the refreshments table. More specifically, get there before I go back."

Eleanor laughed, glad to hear Justine was having a good time. Now that she'd met Alice, she was glad to be here, too.

"No. It can't be." A jocular masculine voice sliced through their feminine gaiety. "The prodigal countess has returned? The Lord hath shone His light on me today."

"Mr. Drummond!" Eleanor's smile stretched even farther. Another friend. Her only friend from the past, in fact. This was a good day. "How wonderful to see you."

The man bowed before them all, barely making a crease in his exquisite black evening kit. William Drummond had always been an up-to-the-minute dresser, but more importantly he was a merry wag and had befriended Eleanor from her earliest days as a countess. When no one else would deign talk to her, Mr. Drummond was there. She'd taken to seeking him out first at every event she attended and had been thrilled by the attention he paid her.

He took her hand and kissed the back of her glove. "Please, you must introduce me to this bevy of beauties surrounding you."

Yes, he was an outrageous flirt too. But it was all in good fun.

Eleanor waved to each of the ladies in turn. "Her grace, the Duchess of Burnham, my husband's sister, Lady Portia Mayne, and Mrs. Robson, recently arrived from America. May I present Mr. William Drummond?"

He greeted each of them charmingly, not even hinting that he knew anything salacious about Alice. He had met Mr. Robson the other day at Octavius's arsenal, he claimed, and his praise of the older man had Justine smiling.

"We've missed you, Lady Lexden," Drummond said, turning, his blue eyes warm and friendly.

Eleanor arched an eyebrow. "You and who else? The king's least favorite spaniel?"

He gave a laugh, and the five of them settled into a conversation about the poor king and his ill health, a subject upon which even Portia made a remark or two. Eleanor hadn't missed that her sister-in-law brightened considerably when the handsome Mr. Drummond entered their circle. She wished she could somehow encourage the man to ask her to dance, but no such idea came to mind that wasn't forward or rude.

Then, it was almost as if he read her mind. He tipped his head to the side and said, "Mrs. Ardmere seems to have employed a fine orchestra. Lady Lexden, surely you will not keep this young lady from dancing?"

"Never." Triumph surged through Eleanor's veins as Portia blushed prettily and her eyes shaded from sulky midnight to carefree cerulean. "But I will not do your work for you, Mr. Drummond. Half the pleasure of dancing is in being asked."

The man winked at her and then turned to Portia. "Will you do me the honor, my lady?" Dropping his voice to a whisper, albeit one they could all hear, he added, "I know I am not worthy, but please do not allow me to be disgraced in front of these distinguished ladies."

Portia tried to hold back a giggle and just managed. She swallowed before saying, "I will gladly dance with you, sir."

She slipped her gloved hand into the crook of Drummond's arm, and off they went to the next room.

Justine shook her head. "That one is a bit too much."

He was. But Eleanor had learned that when the rest of polite society—and your own husband—couldn't spare you a glance, let alone a word, having someone like William Drummond around was a godsend. "He's harmless. Portia won't be able to do anything *but* have a fine time with him."

"Oh, look." Justine's eyes shone just as brightly as Portia's. "There are the gentlemen now. Perhaps we'll have a chance to dance too."

Alice peered over at the men. "That's your husband?"

Much as Eleanor would like to deny the connection... "Yes, that's Lord Lexden. Do you know him?" Oh God, what if the duchess was his mistress? Was that possible? Of course it was. He hadn't lain with Eleanor in six years; he probably had a score of mistresses littered throughout the *ton*.

"No, but I've heard... I'm just surprised..."

Alice couldn't seem to finish a sentence. Her dithering made Eleanor suspicious, but she did not want to feel that way. She *liked* Alice.

While Octavius spoke to a portly gentleman, Mr. Robson arrived to claim his wife for a dance. Eleanor glanced at her husband to be certain he was still distracted, and she saw his tête-à-tête with the other man was surprisingly animated. They must be discussing rifles.

She decided to be direct. She'd rather lose Alice's friendship now than after they'd solidified it. "Do you know my husband?"

Alice blinked but didn't hesitate to answer. "No, as I've said. I just—"

Eleanor softened her tone. "If there is gossip about my husband, I would prefer to be prepared for it. Please, tell me the truth."

The duchess shifted her gaze to Octavius then turned back. "I do

owe you that much. I've...I've heard your husband referred to as 'The Monk.' I was astonished to see him here and see that he's... Oh, this is most untoward of me. I was surprised he's a normal-looking, handsome man."

There were so many things clearly left unsaid, Eleanor's head spun. Surely the *ton* called her husband The Monk in jest because of his sexual appetite, not because of any perceived celibacy, the same way large men were sometimes called Tiny as a nickname. And what was Alice really thinking? That Eleanor should be ashamed for living apart from Octavius?

A frown tugged down Alice's pretty features, while guilt yanked on Eleanor's conscience. She shouldn't have such horrible thoughts about the duchess. She was normally more charitable.

Drawing in a breath she said, "Thank you for your candor. I apologize for bullying it out of you."

"You did no such thing." The duchess smiled sweetly. "I had best find the duke. He doesn't like me to be out of sight for too long."

Now there was another mysterious statement.

"Alice—"

The duchess squeezed Eleanor's hand. "I must go. But please, do say you'll come to the garden party. I'll have the invitation sent over tomorrow."

"Yes, of course. We would love to."

"Goodbye then." And the duchess slipped into the crowd just a moment before Octavius appeared from it.



Chapter Thirteen



“**Y**ou don’t appear to be having a good time,” he accused, his face as stern as usual. His words clearly meant, *It was your idea to come here, and I need us to appear as a normal couple. You have no one to blame but yourself if you aren’t having fun.*

As if the Monk knew how to have a good time.

Well, if she was miserable, he could be too.

“Perhaps I would like to dance,” she suggested.

His gaze discomfited her. He didn’t refuse right away, either. If anything, he appeared to be considering the idea.

“Perhaps you should find someone to ask then.”

The words were unkind, but they lacked true bite, almost as if he said them because they were expected. And they were, of course. He and Eleanor had developed an ugly pattern to their conversations. But lately...

What if he was truly concerned that she wasn’t having a good time? What if he did want to dance with her?

Octavius lifted his head, moving on. “The evening seems to be a success.”

Eleanor swallowed past the lump in her throat. “I agree. Mrs. Robson is much amused. And Portia too.”

“That’s good, yes?”

“Yes,” Eleanor admitted. Her husband’s artless-older-brother act was a bit unfair, but she couldn’t stop a slight curve of her lips. “As we suspected, the attention of other men has done much to improve her mood.”

Octavius blew out a breath, clearly pleased. Then: “There’s a balcony at the other end of the room.” He paused. “Would you like to step outside?”

She looked up, surprised to see no bitterness or severity in his

eyes. Nothing but trepidation and kindness. Was it possible? Could he possibly want to change things for the better? Could she possibly trust him?

"I would love to," she decided. And she looped her arm through his proffered one and tucked herself up against his side.

No one greeted them as they wended their way through the crowd, but quite a few heads turned. It would have been easy to think that Octavius was putting on a show because he wanted everyone to see how happily married they were; however, Eleanor wanted to try thinking differently. Perhaps he simply liked having her there, snug against his side. That nickname was burned into her mind, though: The Monk. Was everyone thinking what a fool she was, carrying on as if she were important to him when he had a string of lovers? Actually, wasn't she a fool any way she looked at this?

They stepped onto the balcony which overlooked the Ardmores' back garden. A light breeze wafted across her arms and chest, immediately cooling Eleanor off. She'd needed this relief more than she'd known. One other couple was there, off to the right, so Octavius guided her to the other corner.

She rested her arm on the balustrade while her husband leaned his back against it. Knowing he probably wouldn't start the conversation, she remarked, "I truly think Mrs. Robson is enjoying herself."

"Excellent." The wavering candlelight from inside illuminated the side of Octavius's face that she could see. He slanted his gaze toward her. "Thank you."

Well. Gratitude was unexpected "You're welcome. And Mr. Robson?"

He lifted a shoulder. "He doesn't like to be parted from his wife for very long."

"How sweet." She'd tried her best not to inject any sort of judgment into those two words.

"Do you think so? Most of them"—he waved toward the house—"wouldn't agree."

"No, they probably wouldn't," Eleanor said quickly, grasping at the opportunity to have a normal conversation with her husband. "Seeing the Robsons together makes me want to smile, though. They are happy. They are each accepting of who the other is. I mean, she's a bit of a mother hen, but he doesn't let it bother him."

“I would almost say he likes being henpecked.”

Eleanor couldn't miss the sparkle of knowing humor on her husband's face. Goodness, he *was* handsome. She could stare into those warm brown eyes forever, as long as he held the usual acrimony at bay.

He slipped his hand into hers and bent his head closer. “When you look at me like that, I want to kiss you.”

She inhaled, sending a rich combination of red wine and his bayberry cologne straight to her head, and she replied honestly, “I stare at you like that because I want you to kiss me.”

He wouldn't do it, though. Not with a hundred people so near, including his sis—

His hot hand molded to her neck and pulled her close, and he kissed her as if he were powerless to stop himself. At that notion, Eleanor's skin tingled. It was as if she'd just stepped in from the freezing cold to find a roaring fire. Octavius was firmly in charge, holding her in place with his hand, his mouth claiming hers in kiss after hungry kiss...and she didn't mind in the least. She put her hands on his chest and leaned into him, the wild beat of his heart reverberating through her.

Someone nearby laughed loudly. Octavius stilled. Drawing away, he turned her slowly so that his broad back blocked her from the view of those inside.

As it was, they'd provided enough fodder for any party gossips. They needed to step back onto formal, defensive ground.

Eleanor knew just the question. “Why are you known as the Monk?”

Wariness shadowed his eyes. “Where did you hear that? It's not important.”

“It is to me.” More important than she wanted it to be, in fact.

His cheek had turned a harsh shade of red. “I would rather not say, Eleanor.”

“And I would probably rather not hear, Octavius, but I'm going to insist anyway.”

He huffed out a breath and shook his head. When he spoke at last, she could barely hear him. “I've never had a mistress. Nor have I dallied with any widows or...anyone else. Certain acquaintances thought it was funny and...”

Eleanor could barely breathe. Her heart pounded in her chest. “You— Never? In six years?”

A small muscle twitched in his jaw. "No."

"Not even once? With some pretty actress?"

"Eleanor."

No wonder last week's romp had been so fabulous. Then again, with his reaction afterwards... Perhaps he simply wasn't interested in those sorts of activities, marital or extramarital.

"I'm taking Henry to the park tomorrow," he suddenly said, and Eleanor refocused her attention on him. Clearly he wanted to speak of anything else but his after-dark proclivities.

She drew in a ragged breath. "Yes, he told me as much. I can hardly credit it though."

"We made a deal."

"Oh? What was his end of the bargain?"

"I'm not making him do anything nefarious. We struck a gentlemen's agreement, that's all."

Eleanor shivered at the sudden chill of the wind. "You're being purposely vague."

"I know. You're being purposely intrusive," he replied, but was it in the tone he'd used to fondly relate Mr. Robson's wife's henpecking?

"Of course I want to know. He's my son."

"He's...mine too."

Octavius's voice started as forceful as hers but had trailed off in a whisper. The chatter, clinks, and musical notes of the soiree faded into the background. An owl hooted, emphasizing the silence where they stood. Finally, Eleanor smiled.

"Yes, he is. You'll both have a grand time."

Octavius stared at the ground. Then he was suddenly leaving. "I promised Mr. Baltry a game of whist. He's interested in the arsenal."

The magic, such as it was, had ended. Eleanor nodded and watched her husband walk off. She'd known she couldn't rely on him for entertainment, of course. That was up to her. So she returned inside to find it, only slightly upended by Octavius's abrupt behavior.

After an exhilarating contra dance in which Mr. Robson proved himself quite talented, she barely had time to catch her breath before William Drummond approached. "Your husband won't mind if I steal you for the next reel, will he, Lady Lexden?" Her old friend did a quick survey of the room. "Is he even here this evening?"

“Yes,” Eleanor replied with a vague wave of her hand, still a bit breathless. She would really rather not think about Octavius or the way she found herself pouncing upon any little scrap of attention or affection he tossed her way. Or how she might be—*was*—at least partially responsible for the wretched state of their communication.

Oh. She had been asked to dance and promptly dropped into a brown study. She blinked up at Mr. Drummond and gave him a brilliant smile to cover her embarrassment. “Lord Lexden won’t mind in the least if we dance. And I would like nothing better.”

Drummond’s smile seemed slightly odd, but before she had time to wonder why, he took her hand and swept her onto the parquet floor and into a rousing set. Every time they met up in the promenade or circle, he bent his head to Eleanor’s ear and made a droll remark about the company, the food, or even his dancing skills. Eleanor was amused—one would be hard-pressed not to be—and laughed often. A piece of her mind couldn’t help straying, however, time and again to Octavius. What was he doing? Regretting not asking her to dance? Wishing their kiss could have been more? More likely he was speaking with Mr. Robson about the arsenal and wishing himself elsewhere.

At last she and Drummond had a moment in the dance to catch her breath. While others performed the lively steps, he winked at her and asked, “What brings you to London, my lady? You *and* Lady Portia. I don’t believe I realized how lacking in belles this Season was until the two of you arrived this evening.”

What silliness. But then what did she expect from Drummond? He was charming to be sure, but he never said anything of substance. Which was probably why she liked him. He made her laugh but required nothing in return. He was easy to be around—unlike certain other people.

“I thought it would do both my son and Lady Portia some good to enjoy the amusements of Town. Portia, especially, has been kept from Society for too long.” So, so true. As an earl’s daughter, she could have been launched and married off years ago: a situation that would seem to be a boon for Octavius, as he would no longer be responsible for her.

Then again, Eleanor had never understood her husband’s motivations regarding anything. Take, for example, his accusation that she had cuckolded him. What had she ever done to make him suspicious of her fidelity? The very few times they’d been out and

about socially, she'd been virtually ostracized. Certainly she'd been ignored by all except Mr. Drummond. Surely Octavius didn't think

"My lady?" Drummond had his hand out. They were expected down the line of dancers.

Eleanor set off with him, murmuring an apology. She couldn't afford to alienate the one friend she did have, so for the rest of the set she gave Drummond her full attention.

When they finished, he kept her arm tucked in his and escorted her to the side of the room.

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked as his gaze skimmed the crowd.

His eyes cut to her. After a moment's hesitation, he smiled ruefully. "Just your lovely sister-in-law. I wish to dance with her again."

Eleanor smiled. "I think she would like that."

They found Portia near the refreshments table with Justine. She was all smiles and twinkling blue eyes when he made his proposal, and as the pair headed back to the dancing room, Justine and Eleanor watched.

Not long after, Mr. Robson came to claim his wife for another dance. Eleanor set off to find Alice the duchess.

Instead, she found her husband.

"Eleanor."

His hand circled her arm. She didn't flinch. No indeed, she wanted to turn and lean into him, as she'd done on the balcony. She wanted to give him that look that would make him kiss her...which frustrated her no end. They solved none of their problems with kisses.

Instead, she locked her muscles and raised her brows inquiringly. "Yes?"

Someone bumped into her, thrusting her against Octavius's chest. His grip tightened around her arm, and his other hand went to her hip to steady her. A shiver of excitement strummed along her spine. Blast.

"Where is Portia?" he asked, failing to remove either of his hands.

"She's dancing."

"With whom?"

"Mr. Drummond again."



Chapter Fourteen



Before the last syllable was even out of her mouth, the hand around Eleanor's arm clenched so tightly she gasped.

"What?"

Her husband's jaw didn't move, but somehow the word escaped, for Eleanor heard it and the fierce underscoring anger. Octavius stared behind her at the dancers.

She yanked her arm free. Why must the man overreact to everything? "Mr. William Drummond. This is her second dance with him. He's a nattering dandy who—"

"No."

Eleanor was losing patience. "Octavius..."

"No!" he roared. His chest heaved violently as he gulped in air and stared at the dancers, and those nearby gawped in bewilderment. Maybe even fear. Eleanor's cheeks must be as flaming red as her husband's by now. How could he act like such a child over a simple dance?

"That dastardly snake. I'll *kill* him."

Octavius's voice lashed out across the stunned, silent crowd. Eleanor looked back and saw Mr. Drummond bend close to Portia's ear, whispering heaven knows what. Her sister-in-law laughed and blushed, and Octavius thrust forward—

Eleanor instinctively threw her arm around his middle, blocking him. She had to lean all her weight into him and, even then, she barely stopped his charge. Fists clenched, he kept pressing; she locked her knees, certain that if she didn't hold him back her husband would beat Drummond into a sorry heap. At Mrs. Ardmore's soiree. She'd known he lacked social grace, but this was ridiculous.

"Get her away from him! He can't— They shouldn't— They

don't know. God, they don't know!"

His jagged breaths skittered across the top of her head. Eleanor looked up, and for a moment her grip went slack. Her husband's eyes were screwed up with anguish, unable to focus. This wasn't his usual stern, I'm-in-control-and-that's-the-way-it-is temper. This was something raw, something base that had welled up from deep within, and Eleanor's annoyance turned to stomach-roiling fear.

Freed by her distraction, Octavius pushed past and barged into the room where the oblivious dancers still twirled. She dashed in front of him and braced her hands against his waistcoat, but he drove forward, nearly plowing her over before she regained her balance. Everyone else had taken several steps back, ladies hiding behind gentlemen, peering over their shoulders. No one came to help.

"Octavius!" she whispered fiercely.

He didn't—couldn't—hear her. She couldn't stop him. He was too big, too crazed. And she had no idea why.

"Where is that craven bastard? I want his filthy hands off my sister."

The words spewed forth atop the elegant music. The musicians' bows screeched, and the dancers stumbled to a stop. Octavius's gaze cut wildly around the room. His fists were cocked and ready. If he spotted Drummond again, Eleanor would have no chance at stopping him.

Elliot Robson appeared at her side like a white knight. "Lady Lexden, may I be of some assistance?"

Still leaning all her weight against her husband's torso, Eleanor swallowed a worthless sob and said, "His lordship is not feeling well."

The dear man took the understatement in stride. "Indeed. Let us get him home then."

With a strength belied by his age and slender build, the American looped one of Octavius's arms around his shoulder and maneuvered him toward the entrance hall. Eleanor caught a glimpse of Portia, whose eyes glistened with tears. Beside her, Mr. Drummond had an odd expression on his face.

Portia needed her. But, first things first. Eleanor swept past the still gaping crowd and asked the nearest footman to summon a hackney.

Just then, Octavius shook free. He swung back toward the

ballroom, his face blazing. "Drummond! Get away from my sister!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Eleanor saw Justine wrap her arm around Portia and draw her away from the ghastly scene in the entrance hall. At the same time, the Duchess of Burnham hooked her arm through William Drummond's and guided him in the opposite direction. Eleanor blinked back stinging tears and grabbed one of her husband's arms, while Robson took hold of the other. Somehow, they two steered Octavius's fifteen stone of seething fury out the front door and down the steps.

The hackney arrived not a moment too soon. Eleanor and Robson shoved Octavius inside, none too gently, then Eleanor turned to Mr. Robson. "We'll leave the carriage for you."

"Will you be all right?"

She had no idea. But her husband had never been violent with her before, so she would trust that he wouldn't hurt her now, no matter how angry he was. "Yes, of course." She faltered on the step and Robson caught her hand. She said, "Portia. How could I—?"

"Entrust her to us," Robson said. "We'll take her back to our hotel. If you wish her home tonight, send word. Otherwise, we'll escort her home in the morning."

Eleanor squeezed his hand and ducked inside the hackney with a grateful nod. He slapped the side of the vehicle, which drove off.

At the lurch of the carriage, Octavius whipped up his head. He'd been in a brown study. "My sister! We can't leave her. I can't—"

Not knowing what else to do, Eleanor placed her hand upon his back. "She is going home with the Robsons. She is quite safe in their care."

At this, he dropped his head into his hands.

They rode in silence. Humiliation burned Eleanor from the inside out. She had lived in dread of embarrassing herself and her noble husband amongst the gilded *ton*. Little did she know, *her* behavior had been the least of her worries. She looked to the man sitting beside her. His breathing was rough and loud. If he wasn't Octavius Rupert Henry Mayne, Earl of Lexden, a man as hard as marble, she might have imagined he was crying.

Words were useless right now. As were anger and mortification. She settled quietly back against the squabs.



HE'D BEEN PUSHED, PULLED, shoved, and hauled about without

compunction in the last ten minutes, but it was the gentle pressure of a hand upon his back that dragged him away from the brink of madness.

An inch away, maybe two. That raging fire still burned through his body, making it difficult to breathe or think. Base instincts were the only connections being made in his brain. The urge to pummel William Drummond was overpowering. If not his enemy, more's the pity, but something. Anything.

The carriage jerked to a halt. That steadying hand deserted him. He clambered out and staggered up the steps of his house.

He stood in the hall, blinking, unable to see clearly. So many images flashed through his mind: Portia and Drummond dancing and flirting, the resemblance between the two of them, Drummond bragging about bedding Eleanor, the announcement of her pregnancy soon after, his father's lifeless body, blood oozing everywhere, his haughty-faced mother kissing the elder Robert Drummond just days later...

He struck out with his arm, knocking the salver and a vase of flowers off the pier table. The resounding crash was somewhat gratifying. Swinging in a circle, he looked for something else against which to do violence.

"If you are going to destroy things, please do so in the sitting room, which is about to be refurbished anyway."

Eleanor's matter-of-fact tone slashed through the red haze choking his mind. His breaths came easier all of a sudden. He turned to find her standing, arms crossed beneath her bosom, just inside the front door. Stray locks of hair hung limply beside her flushed cheeks, and more recent images replaced the horrifying ones filling his head: Eleanor holding him back, that desperate call of his name, that hand on his back.

"Please forgive me," he said.

He retrieved the salver and, using his handkerchief, swept up the broken bits of vase and crumpled flowers. Setting the mess back on the table, he gave Eleanor a brief bow and then took the stairs two at a time.

He had his waistcoat unbuttoned and his cravat loosened by the time he reached his bedchamber. Here he would change into his banyan, eat as many biscuits as Cook had on hand, and work on the plans for the arsenal. Robson had left one of his American rifles, so perhaps Lex would take it apart and then sketch each piece.

Although, considering the current state of his mind, perhaps he shouldn't be anywhere near a gun.

Truth be told, no one would care if he followed further in his father's unbalanced footsteps. He'd made certain of that, hadn't he? Eleanor would be the merriest of widows. Portia would be an heiress able to marry as she pleased—

That right there ensured he wouldn't dare harm himself. He had to keep Portia away from Drummond.

In the darkened room, he whipped off his cravat. A rustle sounded from the bed. Then a cheerful, "Good evening, sir."

Lex's heart seized, once, painfully. He swallowed thickly. "Colonel."

"I have our trip to the park planned out. Ten o'clock, right, sir?"

Thank God for the dark. Lex squeezed his eyes shut. "Excellent. I will see you in the morning, then."

"Is Mama here? She usually kisses me, even if I'm asleep, before she retires."

"I'm certain she'll be up soon. R-rest well."

"You too, sir. Good night."

Lex stole toward his dressing room. The door from Eleanor's chamber clicked open, and light spilled in.

"Mama!"

"Right here, sweet pea." Eleanor bustled across the room, breaking her stride and her tender tone briefly as she passed Lex. "I expect you in my room within five minutes. One paltry apology is not reparation enough for what you did this evening."

He stood stock-still as she proceeded to the bed and tucked the linens around Henry, murmuring loving, motherly words. It was too much for his shattered brain, so he forced his feet to carry him to the dressing room. There his valet helped him out of his quite-rumpled coat and his shoes, and Lex dismissed the man. He stripped to his shirt and pantaloons then shrugged into his banyan. A splash of cold water on his face didn't help as much as it should.

He stepped back into his dark and silent bedroom and crossed to Eleanor's door without glancing at the bed or its occupant. Not for a second had he considered disobeying his wife's edict. His mind was still clouded, but he knew his behavior had been abominable. Enduring Eleanor's lecture would be his penance.

Very well, a *fraction* of his penance.

He entered, expecting to be immediately assaulted by her sharp

tongue, but Eleanor wasn't even there. He collapsed into the chair by the fire and stared at the carpet until its blue and gold fibers swirled together, then concentrated on those colors, staving off any and all thoughts. He could not think. Remembering what he'd seen, what he'd done, what he knew, would drag him back into madness and misery.

Eleanor. It was imperative that he focus on arming himself against her. Knowing his wife, she was bound to pry, to chisel away at the defenses he'd built. A few stones had fallen of late, and there was no time to lose in rebuilding.

He felt her return, but he didn't look up. She paused in the doorway; then he heard her slippered feet shuffle across the carpet. Silence ate up the next few minutes. Lex could feel her glare scorching the top of his head, but he couldn't bring himself to straighten.

"For someone who lives a cold and closed life, that was an impressive display of emotion this evening."

A bludgeoning hit to the gut.

He withstood it.

After an interminable delay, she paced to the middle of the room. "So, that is your strategy? Silence? Very well, I have much to say and now twice as much time in which to say it. Your behavior was...was..." She huffed out a breath. "There aren't suitable words to describe it. I think Henry, at age two, would have been better behaved in public, even if I'd refused him another biscuit."

A glancing blow. Calling him childish would have been much more direct. *Come, Eleanor, I know you can do better.*

"Do you know how humiliating that was? I had to hold you back, Octavius. Physically restrain you." She slapped something—perhaps the bedpost? "I know my family doesn't have much cache, but not one of us has ever... *Never*. And you just—just—"

The hitch in her breath nearly knocked the wind out of him. He raked his fingers into his hair and stared hard at the carpet, fighting to keep quiet. *You have the grace of ten duchesses, Eleanor*, he wanted to say. *I never meant to hurt—*

She sniffed and cleared her throat, and then she spoke in her usual even-keeled voice. "It seems to me we had three objectives for this evening: one, to ensure the Robsons were entertained; two, to display our blissful marriage to the *ton*; and three, to give Portia a chance to meet other gentlemen." She paused. "You failed

magnificently on all three counts.”

Eleanor’s accusation was as damaging as a punch the kidneys. This situation was entirely his fault, though it would be quite satisfying to lay the blame upon Drummond. He had failed once again.

“I don’t know how to recover from this. Portia... I shudder to think how she might react, given the state she was already in. The Robsons are gracious, of course, and will undoubtedly pretend this evening never happened. But the others? Society? They will feed off this scandal for some time. And I will somehow be to blame.”

Lex bolted upright. “No. I won’t let them blame you.”

“Out of all I just said, *that* pried your mouth open?”

They stared at each other for a moment, Eleanor clearly flabbergasted. She looked away first, her cheeks pink, but Lex waited, having no idea how to go on. His armor was failing him. This was the worst of it: the damage done to Eleanor. Even more, that he cared about that damage.

She turned away, her honey-colored hair, now free of pins, spilling down her back. He sank into his chair, aching. She had to be nearly finished with him. *Had* to be. He was also afraid she would ask why he’d reacted so to Portia and Drummond. Afraid she wouldn’t.

“I am tired. This night was exhausting enough, but to end the way it did... And now you, defend—” She spun back around so fast that Lex didn’t have the chance to look elsewhere. Her eyes were bloodshot, her skin pale. “I just want to know one thing. What could William Drummond possibly have done to you to make you so crazed?”

Crazed. Yes. Everyone—his sister, the Robsons, the *ton*—would know it for certain now. He’d given them clear proof of his mental state. But why did Eleanor sound mystified, as if she couldn’t imagine Drummond committing any kind of sin? She herself had committed the most grievous with him. And why didn’t she care that her lover had moved on to Lex’s sister?

Lex realized his jaw hung loose. He snapped it shut as she demanded, “Well?”

She wanted him to say it aloud, for that would be the fatal blow—forcing him to admit their affair. Fine. If she wanted to discuss her infidelity, they would. Just as his parents had done. Who cared that his father had taken his own life—taking himself out of Lex’s—

immediately after acknowledging the last of his wife's trysts? His mother hadn't cared. Not about the loss of her husband, and certainly not about the existence of her children.

Lex stood, trying to get on equal footing with Eleanor. "What has William Drummond done to me? Many things but let us start with the most base: He took my wife to bed."

Her features screwed up in confusion for a few seconds before they cleared in dawning understanding. Then she laughed. Not the soft musical laugh that wrapped around him like a blanket, but a harsh snicker that scraped his nerves raw. "I knew you were deluded in thinking I had an affair, but thinking I did *that* with Mr. Drummond?"

"I know you did."

"Oh? And how, pray tell, do you *know*, my lord? Did you espy us in criminal conversation with your own eyes?"

"Drummond himself admitted the affair, though in much cruder terms."

First she blinked at him several times, then her eyes went round, her jaw slack. "He did? Why? Why would he do that? He's just a...a..."

Lex's voice was sharp, full of more feeling than he wanted to hear in it. "I can think of plenty of names to call him, even if you can't. As to why he told me, that's simple. Drummond gains no satisfaction if I'm not aware that he's fu—"

Her hand came up, as if she meant to slap him, but stopped in mid-air. "No," she whispered. "He didn't. We didn't. Why would he say that about me? We're friends."

Lex snorted. "Friends?"

He paused before saying anything else. However much he might usually be a thick-headed ox, even he could see how distressed Eleanor was. She wasn't crowing over his admission that she'd betrayed him with Drummond, either. She hadn't cared that the man danced with Portia, and somewhere from the hazy depths of his mind he recalled Eleanor naming Drummond a "nattering dandy." Not exactly an insult, but neither was it high praise. Not for a lover.

Oh, God. Lex stepped backward. Drummond was a snake, but was he that much of a snake that he would lie to Lex about sleeping with Eleanor?

Yes. Of course.

The air between them seemed to fog over, swirling around and obfuscating his view of her. His ears rang in the numbing silence and, as before, scenes from the past flew through his mind.

He'd got it all wrong.

He sucked in a breath and the air cleared. Eleanor still stood there. But not the same Eleanor. He didn't know this Eleanor. She was a stranger.

She gave her head a little shake. "It is an extraordinary shame that Mr. Drummond is not here at present, for I find myself in complete unity with your desire to harm him."

Ah, well, not a stranger entirely.

"Eleanor..."

He took her hand, but she took it back and walked—unsteadily—to the bedside table. "I brought up some tea and Shrewsbury biscuits. I know they are one of your favorites. Would you like some?"

She knew his favorites, and he'd accused her of the worst. It should have been liberating to know his wife hadn't betrayed him. It should have made him happy. Instead, he was miserable. She'd been young and innocent and trusting. Now she was cynical and shrewish. Because of him. Because of—

"Stop it. You are getting that wild look on your face again." She shoved a plate and cup in his hand and waved toward the chair. "You'd best have some tea because, as I've already lamented, Drummond is not at hand."

He stood frozen. "Eleanor, we must talk. I want to—"

"No." Her hazel eyes were so very dark. "Not yet. I'm not ready, Octavius."

He'd never wanted to hurt his family as his father had hurt him. That's why he'd kept his distance from Portia. That's why he'd never planned to marry or sire children. Now, here his wife stood, pain evident in her sagging shoulders and the lines across her forehead. He'd hurt and humiliated her. And she wouldn't even let him apologize.

He sat and ate the biscuits, washing their tasteless crumbs down with tea. After a few minutes, Eleanor sat opposite him. She whisked a straggling lock of hair behind her ear and then said, "I don't understand *why* he would do that. I thought of him as a friend. He always had a kind word for me, always asked me to dance at least once. I thought he would be good for Portia. I

thought he would make her feel...wanted."

Lex fought down a shudder at the idea of Drummond wanting Portia. Beyond that, Eleanor had shot a different arrow into him: Except for when he'd first proposed, he'd never made her feel wanted.

"Perhaps..." They were both too wounded to go on. "Perhaps we'd best retire. It's been a long evening. Has the megrim returned?"

Eleanor shook her head. "I just don't understand."

"I'm not certain there is any way to understand someone like Drummond."

His wife pegged him with sharp eyes. "I've often thought the same of you."

Yes, well, he'd *meant* to be that way. Yet his success at impenetrability didn't sit well with him. It had cost Eleanor. For the thousandth time, he regretted marrying her. Yet, if he'd not married her, her father would have landed in debtor's prison and she and her mother would be living in penury. What a damned coil.

She rose and arranged the dishes back on the tray. Then she tamped down the fire and began extinguishing the candles. Every move was deliberate, almost stiff, as if her muscles were tender.

He had to offer something. "Perhaps...perhaps I should move the boy in here and sleep in my own bed."

"No, let us not disturb him." Eleanor flicked a glance his way as she plumped her pillow. "He has an important meeting in the morning, after all."

The relief coursing through him was disconcerting, but Lex ignored it. "Yes, I am well aware."

He waited as she slipped off her wrapper and slid between the bed linens. Then he blew out the last candle.

She'd turned to face away from him, but still he settled as close to the edge as possible, giving her ample room. The silence was stifling. He wanted to say something. Not *something*. The right thing. The words that would best salve this impossible wound. But he could think of nothing that would repair the damage he'd done to Eleanor.

And what of Portia? Thank God she was with the sensible and kind Robsons right now. No. Not God, actually. His wife had refused his apology, but perhaps this was the right thing to say. "Thank you, Eleanor. You would have been justified in taking Portia

and leaving me at the Ardmores’.”

Her response was so soft he had to strain to hear. “I understand, now, why you feel the way you do about Drummond. Your actions this evening—while still shocking—make more sense.”

Except that she didn’t truly understand. She didn’t even know the half of it.

Suddenly, he wanted her to know. With all that already stood between them, he didn’t want her in the dark on this. But, how—where—to begin? At the ugliest place, he supposed.

“My parents...”

He couldn’t quite continue, but at the croaked words she turned onto her back and whispered encouragement. “Your parents...?”

Lex closed his eyes. He didn’t want to see Eleanor’s reaction, whether it be pity, contempt, indifference. He rolled onto his back, and his hand accidentally landed atop hers. After a moment’s hesitation, he curled his fingers around her palm. She didn’t pull away.

“My mother regularly cuckolded my father.”

Eleanor’s hand stiffened. Lex hurried on, too aware how transparent his feelings were.

“I think I first realized it when I was ten or so, but she’d been doing it for years. She wasn’t particularly discreet. I think all of Society knew. When my father was off tending to his estates, I’d often pass one of my mother’s...paramours on the stairs in the morning.”

“I’m sorry, that must have been upsetting for you. But surely now you realize some marriages are like that by design.”

“I wish my parents’ marriage had been so designed. However, my father loved my mother. Passionately.”

“Oh.”

That one, whisper-soft word spoke volumes.

“His behavior could be quite erratic,” Lex admitted. *Just like mine.* “By passionate, I mean that he was either wholeheartedly demonstrative of his love for her or listless and melancholic, despairing that he could ever be worthy of her or that she would ever love him equally in return. He was like that with most things, actually, either enthusiastic to an unusual degree or so forlorn and despondent that he wouldn’t get out of bed. He wasn’t an easy man to live with.”

“I...I had no idea your life was so unstable.”

"That's not the point I'm trying to make," Lex snapped. His voice was too harsh; he knew it, but he couldn't moderate his tone. He hadn't meant to reveal this much. What if Eleanor realized how alike he and his father were? Why hadn't he just started with the simple fact that Portia and Drummond were siblings?

"The point is, my mother carried on an extended liaison with Drummond's father. I knew of the affair at the time but only recently made a significant connection. Portia is not my father's daughter."

Silence. But Lex knew exactly when Eleanor understood. She clenched his hand, and he heard the harsh intake of her breath.

"Open your eyes, Octavius."

He turned toward her and did as she asked. At first nothing changed; blurred darkness prevailed. Then a soft, shadowy version of Eleanor's face came into focus.

"You cannot hide from this," she whispered. "It's painful and ugly, and there are some things we should never know about our parents, but you can't bury this secret."

"I can't—"

She laid her fingertips on his lips for the briefest moment. "Yes, you can. Only Portia need know. But she *must* know."

He shook his head. "No. Portia's behavior is already unpredictable. She is overset about Mr. Semple as it is. If I tell her this, if I tell her she is not the daughter of the seventh Earl of Lexden, I don't know what she'll do." He huffed out a breath. "But I'm certain I won't like it."

Eleanor's eyes widened, and she blinked rapidly. "You're right. My goodness, how perceptive of you."

"Try not to sound so shocked."

She smiled. "I knew you cared for your sister. I just didn't think you *understood* her. Heavens, even I don't understand her. She's not the girl I thought I knew through our correspondence."

The barest hint of bitterness came through, and Lex realized Eleanor expected an ally when Portia came to town. Now she was saddled with an unruly, reckless charge—and a devil of a husband who'd humiliated her in private and public.

"Eleanor, I'm—"

"Don't." She disentangled their hands. "At present we need to keep our attention on Portia."

Lex fell onto his back, irked that she continued to deny him the

opportunity to apologize. A man should have the right to at least try to make amends for his behavior. And she thought he was a stubborn ass?

Very well, he would pretend the last few minutes of their conversation never happened.

“Of course I care for my sister. I’ve only ever tried to protect her.” *From myself.* “I will continue to do so. She will not be told the truth about her parentage, at least not now. Not by me and not by you.”

The bed linens rustled as if Eleanor shrugged. “Then you will have to tell Drummond.”

“No.”

“One of them must be told.”

Did she not see how impossible the situation was? “This is the kind of information Drummond lives for. What is to stop him from telling Portia the truth?”

“You and your menacing glower.” At his silence, she poked him in the side. “That was meant to be amusing. And at least partly true. You can try to appeal to him on behalf of the sister you have in common, but I think you’d best be prepared to threaten him into silence if necessary. He obviously doesn’t possess the moral fiber I thought he did.”

Anything Lex said would make him sound like a whining, sentimental fool. He knew there was no escape from this damned situation. That’s what had set him off in the first place.

A soft hand came to rest on his upper arm. “Tell me what you’re thinking. I’m willing to help, but I have to know your thoughts.”

Persistent to the last, Eleanor. Why fight her? “I don’t want to share my sister with Drummond. I want to be well rid of that family. They’ve caused mine nothing but pain.”

“Perhaps we should just send Portia back to Somerset. Then there would be no need to tell her or Drummond.”

“But Semple is there, and we’d not be able to keep watch over her.” Lex scrubbed a hand over his face, surprised by his next thought. “I’d like Portia to remain here, too. You and Mrs. Robson are steadying influences.”

Eleanor squeezed his arm. “I’m glad to hear you say that. I wasn’t in favor of sending her away, but it did seem the simplest solution.”

“Where family is concerned, nothing is simple.”

“So true.”

The wistfulness in her voice jarred him. As did the fact that she didn't contradict him.

He rolled over and pressed his lips to hers. She stiffened at once. So did he.

He reached up and smoothed back her hair. “Eleanor...”

She wouldn't let him say he was sorry with words, but he could try this method again. He lowered his head once more, placing the gentlest of kisses on her closed lips. They opened ever so slightly, and he took her mouth more fully. Still, he kept his kisses undemanding. All he needed was for her to accept his contrition.

She softened beneath him on the third time he touched her lips, kissing him back with the same deliberateness he'd shown. It was as if they were kissing for the first time, each unsure of the other. Amazing. She was his wife of six years, but he didn't know her at all.

He traced his thumb over the outer shell of her ear while he nipped at her lower lip. Though he desperately wanted to, he touched her nowhere else. Perhaps this could be a new beginning. A beginning where they finally, truly became acquainted.

He placed one last kiss on her pliable mouth then pulled back. “Goodnight, Eleanor.”

She kept her eyes closed. “Goodnight, Octavius.”

As she settled down into slumber, Lex stared at the dark canopy of the bed. A thought had come to him. Perhaps, instead of constantly apologizing, he should strive not to do things that called for an apology.



Chapter Fifteen



Upon waking, Eleanor's first thought was of her husband's last kiss. The tenderness, the sweetness. The way he'd stroked her ear. A smile broke upon her face before she even opened her eyes, but then all the other memories from the night crashed down: Octavius's outburst, their humiliating exit from the Ardmores', the revelation of Drummond's lie, the devastating secrets about her husband's family. Her smile was gone in an instant, replaced by tears.

"Mama! Mama!" Henry ran into the room and flung himself onto the bed—the side where Octavius had slept, which was now empty. "Today the earl takes me to the park."

Eleanor swiped away the wetness at her eyes. She wanted to grimace at the way Henry referred to his father, but she managed to smile again. "Indeed it is. Your father is looking forward to the outing."

There was a chance that wasn't an outright lie. Though the cost was high, Octavius had taken huge steps in admitting his erroneous thinking last night.

Henry was on his knees, bouncing and ticking off his fingers. "I will bring my ball, a fishing pole just in case the earl likes to fish, my cricket bat, an old hoop and stick I found in the nursery—"

"Excellent." If nothing else, Henry's incessant chatter would prevent Octavius from dwelling on unpleasant matters. "Now remember, you are to be on your best behavior."

"Mama..."

She laughed at the face he pulled and swept him into her arms. Kissing the top of his head, she said, "I know you're a good boy, Henry, but there are some things that mothers are required to say. Off with you then. You'd best have your breakfast and let Nurse

help you dress.”

He scrambled across the bed, dropped to the floor and shot off.

Eleanor sighed. She was tempted to accompany the two males, for she didn't entirely trust her husband, especially after the events of last night, but she knew she'd only hinder their fledgling bond. Instead, she'd warn Octavius to be on his best behavior too.

She flopped back against her pillow. What a coil. How many times had she sought out the company of William Drummond? Had she ever refused his numerous requests for a dance? No. She'd unwittingly played into his feud with her husband, making Octavius think she was like his mother all over again.

Lady Lexden. The mysterious woman who was alive and had a most ignoble history. To further twist the coil, Eleanor had written to her. She probably should have spoken to Octavius first, but then she'd known what his answer would be, so she'd gone behind his back. As it turned out, Octavius had good reason to keep Portia away from her mother. Eleanor would do her best to convince him to share his reasons with his sister, as he'd done regarding Mr. Semple. And Eleanor herself would have to admit her subterfuge in corresponding with Lady Lexden when life settled down again.

Eleanor yawned. Truthfully, she was exhausted just thinking about all this and hadn't even risen from bed yet. But the day, and her husband, must be faced.

An hour later, dressed and refreshed, she walked into the dining room.

Octavius rose. “Good morning.”

He looked perfectly ordinary, even fine, in his buff breeches and blue coat. His dark hair was perfectly combed, his jaw freshly shaved, his cravat neatly tied. No one would guess that he'd acted like a bedlamite just ten hours ago. Only, Eleanor didn't have to guess. She knew. She knew that and so much more.

What she didn't know was how she felt about her husband.

She tipped her head toward him and moved to the sideboard. Mindlessly, she scooped food onto her plate. Drummond had lied to Octavius. Coupled with his family history and the inordinate amount of time she had spent with the dratted man, she could see how Octavius might believe him. As much as she wished Octavius had had more faith in her, they'd barely known each other when they wed.

What she did know was that she couldn't allow him to

apologize. Of course he had every right to, and every reason, but if he did...she was too afraid of her reaction. Too afraid she'd trip over that line she'd drawn between them and fall into his arms. Ogres didn't apologize for their behavior, because if they did, they weren't ogres anymore. They were human.

Octavius wasn't entirely a monster. He'd displayed occasional bouts of protectiveness and generosity. Somewhere, buried deep, lurked a sense of humor too; she was certain of it. He was someone she could fall in love with. She'd always known that—always feared it. But was falling for him wise? Could her husband discard so easily the mistrust instilled by his mother's behavior, or would his suspicions rear up again and again in the future, crushing Eleanor beneath the weight of...not jealousy, she supposed; this wasn't about that. No, it was simply anger begat from his dreadful past. But he'd been downright awful to Eleanor, and she couldn't snap her fingers and forget it.

A door clicked open. "The morning post, my lord."

"Thank you, Bickley."

Well, she couldn't stand there staring at the baked eggs all morning. She took her plate and seated herself beside Octavius, looked from him to the butler and back again.

He took the hint. "That will be all, Bickley."

As the servant left, Eleanor raised her eyebrows at the stack of letters beside Octavius. "I suppose those are from people dying to attend our ball now that we've given a preview of our entertaining style."

He stared at her as if she'd grown a third eye.

She smiled and shrugged. "Sometimes, all you can do is make light of a situation. A little humor never hurt."

"I wasn't expecting humor. I thought you would ring another peal over my head."

"The day is still young," she replied with a wink.

He ducked his head and forked a piece of sausage. She could have sworn his jawline reddened. She'd not meant to flirt with him, but his reaction intrigued her. *No, it doesn't. Last night changes nothing. Be strong, Eleanor.*

She nodded toward the windowed vista of the sunny park across the street. "The morning looks very fine. Henry is excited about this adventure in the park. I hope you'll be patient with him."

Octavius laid down his fork and took a sip of tea. "I will do my

best.”

That meek answer could not have come from her husband. “You will?”

“Yes.”

She couldn’t help but believe him. He’d looked her in the eye when he said it, and there wasn’t a touch of sarcasm or exasperation anywhere to be found. Who was this man? “Thank you.”

He nodded and lifted the first letter in the stack. Eleanor spread jam on her toast as he opened it. She’d just taken her first bite when Octavius bit off a curse, and she lifted her eyebrows.

“This”—he flapped the piece of paper—“is from Mr. Robson. Portia refuses to come home.”

“Oh dear,” Eleanor said. Truly, though, she wasn’t surprised. Portia had to be upset. She had every right to be, and as emotionally immature as she was, well...

“What do we do?”

Eleanor steeled herself against that little rush of delight she experienced every time her husband asked for her help. Collaboration simply meant they weren’t in an adversarial state. Nothing more.

“Has Mr. Robson indicated if they are willing to have her?”

Octavius scanned the note. “Yes. He says she’s allowing Mrs. Robson to take care of her, and that it’s no imposition if Portia stays for a few days.” He set the paper down. “They are too kind.”

Eleanor hadn’t forgotten the friendship they’d shown her the previous evening. After Octavius and Henry left for the park, she’d intended to write her thanks. She would now also ask if Portia was inclined to see her.

She reached out and covered her husband’s hand with her own. “I agree, they are true friends. And really, this is probably for the best. Justine will know how to calm Portia down. Meanwhile, we must deal with Drummond.”

Octavius cocked his head. “By ‘deal with’ do you mean ‘allow me to pound him into the ground’?”

Eleanor smiled at his attempt at humor. “I thought the aristocracy settled things with honorable duels?”

He considered. “It wouldn’t be quite as satisfying, but Society, at least, wouldn’t blink.”

“I think we need less public scrutiny, not more.” She squeezed

Octavius's hand. "He has to be told. Why don't we invite him to dinner?"

"Eleanor!"

"At least there would be footmen around to restrain you this time."

"You have a wicked sense of humor."

She couldn't quite tell if he considered that good or bad, so she gave him a half-smile. "I'm not so certain about wicked. Cynical, perhaps. But, back to the subject at hand, would you rather speak to Drummond at Boodle's?"

"Of course not," Octavius protested. "But neither do I want the knave in my house."

Eleanor reached for the teapot and refilled her husband's cup, then poured some for herself. "I think it best if we keep this matter as private as possible."

He gave her a look. "As do I, but inviting him here? No. He would never accept anyway."

"I think he would—out of curiosity, if nothing else. Besides, shouldn't we keep him off-kilter?" She took a bite of toast. "Unless you prefer I not be present?"

"I want you there."

He leaned forward, and Eleanor caught a whiff of bayberry. Her stomach started dancing again, and she blinked repeatedly, trying to break the spell he'd unwittingly cast. Attention should not be an aphrodisiac. She knew better.

"Then," she announced, "it's settled. You'll dash off a letter inviting him to dinner one night this week. We'll need to make certain Portia is otherwise occupied."

"Not for dinner," Octavius argued. "I won't subject you to eating with him. I'll ask him to come 'round after."

Eleanor knew very well that *he* didn't want to eat with Drummond either, but she sensed he meant his solicitousness and the simple fact that was concerned for her feelings increased her desire for him. She should be furious with Octavius this morning, and yet somehow her opinion of him wasn't as black as it should be. His parents' marriage had been less than ideal, but that didn't give him the right to treat her the way he had for the past six years. Nothing had changed. She couldn't let one miserable story—and a few moments of solicitousness—alter the course of their marriage.

You're forgetting Drummond's nefarious lies.

She wasn't, though. She just had to protect herself. It was of the utmost importance.

Octavius had finished his breakfast and was draining his teacup. He'd be off with Henry in a moment, and there was one question she'd had last night that she'd never asked. So Eleanor cleared her throat.

"May I ask you something?"

Octavius replaced his teacup, his eyes more than a little wary. "Certainly."

She'd been right; he hadn't completely transformed overnight. His tone was once again cold.

"What was your father's reaction to the revelation of your mother's indiscretions?"

Octavius stiffened. The air in the room got even colder, and Eleanor found herself waiting to hear his father had banished his wife to the country, perhaps even to Mayne Castle where Eleanor had been. Octavius stared at his empty plate for so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. Then his jaw twitched a couple of times and Eleanor expected to be lambasted. At last words came, though she had to strain to hear.

"According to the *Times*, the seventh Earl of Lexden died when the pistol he was cleaning accidentally went off. In truth, he stood before my mother, put the pistol to his temple, and pulled the trigger. My mother ran out of the house and didn't return for an entire day."

Eleanor stared at Octavius in shock. After a moment, he stood up and dropped his napkin onto the table.

"It's ten o'clock. I'm due to meet Henry."

He was gone before Eleanor could think of the slightest thing to say. She hadn't known how his father died. From the sounds of it, not many did. A thousand questions scrambled through her brain, foremost among them: Where were Octavius and Portia when it happened? Had he witnessed the whole episode? Please God, she hoped not.

A new thought entered her mind, and she jumped up and headed for the hall. She'd called up painful memories for her husband just as he was headed out with Henry. What if he exploded again? Could he control himself around his son?



Chapter Sixteen



Lex descended the stairs blindly, images of his father's bloody body hurtling through his mind. By the time he reached the entrance hall he was breathing hard, as if he'd run all the way from the dining room, so he slapped a hand on the newel post to steady himself. His other hand he curled into a fist, fingernails digging into his palm. As the pain increased, the images melted away—a surreptitious trick he'd learned at Harrow.

His vision finally cleared. The footman stationed by the front door studied the vase of flowers nearby, a new one that had replaced the one Lex destroyed the night before. But Henry would have to wait another day. Lex needed to be alone.

"I'm ready, sir!"

Lex turned. The boy bounded down the stairs—well, as much as anyone *could* bound when encumbered by a hoop, a fishing pole, a butterfly net, a ball, and was that...? Yes, a cricket bat.

Henry stared up at him with blinking brown eyes, so Lex cleared his throat. "Indeed you are, but—"

"Octavius?!"

Eleanor came rushing down the stairs, her gaze skittering from him to Henry and back again, and that was *fear* in her eyes. He didn't want her to be afraid of him. Not for herself and not for their child. Eleanor had always stood up to him, withstood his anger and general beastliness. He wanted her to feel she could—and he didn't want to apologize to either of them later for deserting Henry and their appointment now. He wanted to do better.

He looked down at Henry's beaming face. "May I help you carry something, Colonel?"

The boy handed over the bat and the fishing pole with the care usually shown for the Crown Jewels. As Lex tucked them beneath

his arm, Eleanor made a small sound that was either distress or hope. Either way, it would be best to reassure her.

"We'll have a grand time, won't we, Colonel?"

Henry nodded eagerly.

This was easier than Lex had thought. Just saying the words made the idea seem possible. They *could* have a grand time. But...

"We must take refreshments," he declared.

"Cake!" Henry suggested.

A boy after his own stomach.

Lex called the footman and sent him off to the kitchen. When he turned back, Eleanor was combing Henry's hair with her fingers, and over that mop she looked a question at him. With just the slightest hesitation, he nodded.

Just then, Henry dropped his ball. When he chased it across the marbled floor, Eleanor stepped closer, twisting her fingers together.

"I shouldn't have asked," she said. "I didn't know..."

Of course she didn't. How could she have?

"I do not fault you for asking. The memories are painful. I live with them all the time, though."

"Oh, Octavius." She settled her hand on his coat sleeve. "May we speak more of this later?"

"You will talk me into an early grave, Eleanor."

She smiled up at him, kindly, sweetly, her eyes sparkling green in the sunlight that shone through the transom window. "See? You can be humorous when you want to."

He had to kiss her.

She must have felt the same, for she rose up on tiptoes as he lowered his head. Their lips met in the middle. Lex cupped his hand around the nape of her neck, and the kiss began as sweetly as those he'd given her the night before, but just as things turned more sensual, he remembered Henry. With reluctance he retreated, slowly, regretfully, savoring every last second.

"I need to kiss Mama goodbye too," the boy said, having retrieved his ball.

Eleanor smiled. Without a hint of awkwardness, she bent down and pecked him on the cheek. "You must tell me all about the park when you return." She gave him one more kiss on the forehead. "Mind your father, Henry."

Father? The word startled Lex. He could no longer deny being Henry's sire, but the spoken title seemed like a bald-faced lie.

Having known the child for just a week, he didn't feel like Henry's father. He wasn't even certain he was capable of the role, given his experiences.

"Sir?"

And then there was *that*. Not even Henry saw Lex as his father. Not that he should, but it further complicated the matter.

Time to stop thinking. "Right. Let's be off."

The footman handed over refreshments tied up in a napkin. Both Henry and Lex nodded to Eleanor, who gave them a reassuring smile, and then the pair marched out the door. Well, to be more accurate, Henry marched, knees high, while Lex stuck to his more usual style of walking.

The sun shone brightly, but the air had a chill. Lex had never minded living on the corner across from Hyde Park; the almost constant noise and busyness distracted him from too much thinking. Now, to their left, carts, wagons, and hackneys jammed Park Lane.

"I can't wait! What should we do first? Fishing? No. Butterflies, maybe?" The child was bouncing on the balls of his feet, but still he managed to hold on to his possessions as they walked.

"I don't—"

"There's the gate!" Without warning, Henry dashed off into traffic.

Lex's heart dropped into his stomach. A massive draught horse bore down upon the boy, and Henry had just tripped over the handle of the butterfly net and landed with a thud, raising a small cloud of dust.

In several quick strides, Lex reached his son and snatched him up against his chest. The horse and its cart careered past without even slowing down. After a moment, Lex's legs obeyed his brain and he continued onward. He set Henry down across the lane, outside the Cumberland Gate. Crouching down, he tried to slow his breathing and heartbeat.

"Are you hurt?"

Tears streaked the dirt on Henry's face. He shook his head no.

Thank God. Eleanor would do Lex bodily harm if he brought the boy back in less than perfect health. "Then why are you crying?"

The boy sniffed and shrugged.

Lex sighed. He laid down everything he was holding and took out his handkerchief. Grabbing the child's chin with one hand, he mopped up the tears and the dirt with the other. Then he said, "You

know better than to run into the street, but perhaps you were too caught up and couldn't control your body. Is that it?"

It was exactly how Lex had felt last night.

"I wanted to get to the park. We have so much to do."

Lex shook his head as the boy's tears threatened a return. "We have all day, Colonel. We can stay as long as you like."

But, that hadn't been his original plan. There was work to do at the arsenal.

Henry blinked, his wet eyelashes sticking together. "Truly?"

"Yes," Lex found himself saying. He'd have to send word to Robson, but he'd not get much work done anyhow, not with memories of last night's outburst and the problem of Portia crowding his mind. And then there was Eleanor, the wife who hadn't cuckolded him. The wife who apparently knew just what to say when faced with ugly truths.

A smile broke on the boy's face: his mother's saucy one. Then Henry's glance slid to the beckoning gate. "May we go in?"

"Certainly," Lex said.

He grabbed the bat, pole, and napkin, and stood, reflecting as he stared at the top of his son's head. He'd been patient with the child, not raising his voice at all when Henry dashed into the street. Eleanor would be proud. And surprised. Probably surprised first. As surprised as Lex himself.

"You've spent all your life in the country. Do you miss it so much?" he found himself asking. "Is that why you're so eager to come here?"

Henry led the way through the gate and into the park. "Yes, sir. I like playing with my soldiers, but at Mayne Castle I can do that *and* play outside whenever I want."

"Of course," Lex said solemnly. He'd wanted nothing more than to return to the castle after his father's death, but his guardian—an older cousin—had pursued other plans that involved the cousin residing in Somerset with Portia and Lex being shuffled off to Harrow. At the end of term and holidays he'd been allowed to return here, to the empty—except for servants—house on Hereford Street. During those stays he'd learned to find solace in Hyde Park, and before Eleanor arrived, Lex visited at least once a day to enjoy the solitude and the greenery.

Perhaps one good thing had come out of sending Eleanor away: Henry had lived a fine life in the country.

“Ohhhh!” Henry’s eyes were huge as sixpence. “That’s a nice lawn. We must play cricket.”

The grass would make a decent cricket field, Lex allowed. Along the edge, near the footpath, a nursemaid watched over two children, a boy and a girl. Nearer the gate, two other boys played with hoops and sticks while their nurses conversed, but they were all far enough to be safe from a batted ball.

“Let’s have a go, then.”

Lex held up the bat to offer it over, but then he took a closer look at the carved willow wood. “I used to have a bat much like this, though mine had a different handle. Where did you get it?”

“Mr. Carter made it for me.”

“Tom Carter? The one who lives in the cottage by the river?”

Henry nodded and reached for the bat. “He gave it to me on my birthday last year. He said five was just the right age.”

A little reluctantly, Lex handed it over. “Mr. Carter made me a bat, too, when I was younger.”

“You know Mr. Carter? With the beard?”

“I do.” Lex smiled in remembrance. “Does he give you a lemon drop whenever you visit?”

“Yes! It makes my cheeks go like *this*.”

Henry sucked in his cheeks, his eyes crossing, and Lex couldn’t stop a chuckle from slipping out even as he realized he and the child shared a history. That was how it should be for an earl and his son, but...

Henry held up the ball. “Can you bowl for me?”

“Certainly.”

Lex took the ball and paced off fifteen yards. He and Henry established a rather wobbly shrub as one wicket and the butterfly net twisted into the soft ground as the other, then Henry took up his batting stance. His face, eyes scrunched and jaw clenched in concentration, nearly made Lex laugh again.

Sports, however, were serious. One didn’t laugh at the competition.

Lex bowled underhand. Henry swung. Both watched the ball sail into the outfield.

Henry took off running, dashing between the wickets. Lex would have been content to watch that, but another child broke away from his nursemaid as the ball plopped onto the grass, scooped it up and threw it back.

After Henry finally stopped celebrating—he'd scored two runs!—and after a minute of earnest whispering with Lex to get his approval, the boy took off across the lawn to invite the other children to play. Lex didn't mind, for cricket wasn't much fun with just two players. He continued to bowl, while Henry and the others took turns at batting and fielding, making do with only one bat.

Eventually, the others were called away. Seemingly delighted, Henry collapsed on the ground and grinned up at the sky. "That was a thumping good time!"

It had been, Lex admitted. He peeked at his watch. And an hour had passed. He'd entertained the boy for an hour and, most importantly, hadn't lost him or injured him. "Shall we walk down to the Serpentine?"

The youth rose, dusting off his backside. "Yes, let's. Might we have some cake too? Cricket makes me hungry."

The two of them gathered Henry's things and meandered down toward the river.

"Where is the bat Mr. Carter made for you?" Henry asked. "It would be nice to have two bats next time."

Next time? Would there be a next time? Should there be? He hadn't traumatized the boy yet, but was it just a matter of time? He himself had adored his father for twelve years and then... Well, wouldn't Henry be better off forgetting him, the man he called "sir," after Lex finally broke? Lex lived every day with the pain of losing his father. He didn't want his own unpredictability and ultimately maybe even his collapse to ruin Henry's life.

Eleanor would help him figure this out. She was the boy's mother, and she apparently always knew the sensible thing to do. Though, the sensible thing might just be to lock Lex away forever.

Henry tugged on his sleeve. "Sir? Do you know where your cricket bat is?"

Lex shook his head, clearing his cloudy brain. The child just wanted to know about the bat, not about the future of their relationship, such as it was. He blew out a breath, suddenly glad Eleanor wasn't here to see what a nodcock he was, and said, "I'm sorry, I don't know. I think it's probably at Mayne Castle. I don't recall ever playing cricket while I lived in Town."

"That's all right," Henry broke into a gallop.

At last they reached the edge of the river. Two or three people were fishing from the other side, but mostly this area of the park

was deserted. Lex found an empty bench and settled Henry on it. They unwrapped the napkin of food and found two slices of seedcake, a couple of pieces of bread, and a wedge of cheese. Henry advised they should save the bread and cheese for later because, after all, fishing and catching butterflies and rolling hoops made one just as hungry as cricket.

Lex watched the boy, recognizing some of Eleanor in the child: his practicality, the way he tipped his head to study something, his ready smile.

“Do you want to see how fast I can roll my hoop?”

This child was brilliant at keeping Lex from brooding overlong. Living in the present, being unaware of the past—or, in Lex’s case, ignoring the past—might just be the answer to everything.

“I do, Henry. I’ll wager you are one of the fastest hoop-rollers in all of Mayfair.”

“I probably am.” With that show of confidence, the boy grabbed his hoop, found a stick, and set off across the grass.

Lex was watching him go faster and faster when the shadow of a man fell beside him.

“It is a pleasure to see you smile.”

Mr. Robson. Lex couldn’t hold that smile, not with memories of last night suddenly surfacing; the American should be putting distance between them at this point. But he did tip his hat and say, “Good morning, sir.”

“Eleanor told me I could find you here with your son. I do not mean to intrude, but I wanted to see how you fare.”

“I...I believe I may have drunk too much last evening. I beg your forgiveness for any embarrassment I may have caused you and your wife.”

“I don’t think I saw you drink more than one glass of wine.” Robson clapped a hand on Lex’s shoulder. “I do not mean to say you owe me an explanation, but I cannot abide untruths.”

Lex turned and found the older man staring at Henry running pell-mell across the lawn. Henry, his supposedly sick boy. *Damnation*. The American must think him the greatest liar. He owed Robson so much more.

He gestured. “Henry. My son. He’s a healthy child, hardly ever sick.” He cleared his throat. “Eleanor and I...usually live apart by mutual agreement, but we—I—don’t wish to make our circumstances known, so I put it about—to you and to others—that

Henry was ill, requiring Eleanor to live in the country. When I asked her to London to entertain you and Mrs. Robson, I did not expect her to bring the child."

"Hmm."

That one sound conveyed a wealth of disappointment, and Lex's stomach soured, but he knew he had to say more. At least Robson hadn't cut him off like Eleanor. If his apologies continued to pile up inside him, they might just choke him to death.

"I apologize for lying to you about Henry's health. Though my reasons made sense in my head, it was an unacceptable thing to do." He held his breath, waiting to hear if Robson would forgive him or take this opportunity to quit the arsenal and remove himself and his wife from Lex's disgraceful sphere.

Robson's wise blue eyes crinkled at the corners, and he nodded once. "I've never seen the point in refusing an apology sincerely given. Apology accepted. I knew something was odd, but still, you and Eleanor seem well-suited. I'm surprised you haven't been able to make a go of it."

"I..." Lex scrubbed a hand over his face, breathing easier now. Robson hadn't spurned him.

But, as to marriage to Eleanor... It no longer seemed like a torturous punishment, and yet the way forward stretched for miles across a vast desert with obstacles like Portia, Drummond, Lex's parents, Henry, and Lex's madness all strewn across the sand.

"I've said more than I intended." Robson hooked his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets. "I thank you for your sincerity and will leave it at that." After a spell of silence, however, he sighed. "I can't quite leave it at that. I want you to know that my ears are at your disposal if you should need to talk, though I gather discussion isn't a favorite pastime of yours."

"Explain that to Eleanor, would you?"

Robson laughed.

Lex took the opportunity to formulate the right words and continue. "I appreciate your concern, and I thank you for taking in Portia. That is no small kindness, considering how upset she must be."

"Justine is quite willing to offer her succor. She's been lost with only me to cluck over. Soon I will be all but forgotten, though, as Andrew returns in a few days."

"I am glad to hear it," Lex said, with true sentiment. *About damn*

time. "Will the three of you come to dine with us then?"

"We would like nothing better." Robson gestured toward Henry. "Now, let me leave you to your son. Shall we resume work at the arsenal in a couple of days?"

Lex nodded. "Will you convey my regards to Portia? I..." He had no idea how to proceed with his sister, but since she refused to come home, he at least had time to figure something out. With Eleanor's help.

Robson smiled and offered a hand. "I will tell her of your concern and that you are eager to speak with her at her convenience."

"That sounds perfect, thank you."

The two men shook hands, and Robson strolled off. Looking up, Lex saw that Henry had rolled his hoop halfway across the green, so he turned up the path to meet the boy on the other side. A few white clouds now dotted the sky, intermittently hiding the sun.

"You are indeed very fast," he said when Henry ran up. "What now? Catching butterflies?"

"No, thank you. May we throw the ball to each other instead?"

"Whatever you wish."

They piled their extraneous belongings near a thick oak. At first they simply tossed the ball back and forth. Eventually, though, Lex lofted the ball higher and higher. Henry would run around beneath it in circles until stopping at the last second to catch it. Then he would fall onto the grass in a heap of giggles. At last the boy forgot about the ball altogether and simply spread his arms wide and spun in a circle until he was too dizzy to stand, recovering his breath and equilibrium afterward and running over to Lex with his hands out.

"Try it, sir! It's the best feeling."

Lex shook his head. He didn't need to feel any more out of control than he already was. "I don't think—"

Henry grabbed his hands and tugged.

Lex wasn't obligated to move; the little whelp couldn't weigh more than three stone. The sunshine and the boy's merry smile, however, overwhelmed his better judgment. He and Henry twirled around, slowly at first, hands still clasped. As the air whizzed by his ears and the park's greenery blurred, transporting him away from that time, that place, Lex began to turn faster and faster.

Henry ran to keep up. When he no longer could, his feet flew off the ground. Lex tightened his grip on the child's arms as he soared

through the air. Henry screamed, but it was a happy scream. Round and round they two went until Lex's head swam with nothing but giddy, light sparks. When he stumbled, he instinctively pulled Henry to his chest. They fell to the ground with Lex twisting so the child landed on top of him.

They were both huffing and puffing, but Henry managed to say, "I flew! Just like a bird. Or an owl." He pushed himself into a sitting position on Lex's chest and widened his already big brown eyes, blinking just like one. In between gasps, Lex laughed. Out loud. Which almost made him choke.

Henry started pounding on his chest. "Are you all right, sir?"

Lex nodded and concentrated on breathing for the moment. His problems—Portia, Drummond—were still in the back of his mind, but he had to admit that he didn't regret the exhilarating ride. Life wasn't all doom and gloom. Just ask Henry.

"That was wonderful, Colonel. Maybe next time I can do the flying and you can do the falling."

Giggling, the boy stood. Lex sat up. His brain still felt light and airy, so he proceeded no further.

Henry retrieved their napkin of refreshments and sat beside him, legs crossed. "Would you like some cheese?"

Sustenance wouldn't be a bad idea, so they ate and watched more and more people enter the park: ladies on horseback heading toward Rotten Row, groups of young men chatting and gesticulating, merchantmen hurrying across the paths.

"What would you like to do now?" Lex asked. He felt more himself—which wasn't necessarily good. However, Henry would keep him occupied.

"I want to go home."

"You do?" The question came out automatically, but Lex focused on the boy's words. Henry considered that townhouse his home? Even Lex didn't ever call it that. Not *that* house.

Henry nodded. "I've had a grand time, sir, but I know you have work to do. Your estates and the arsenal. And Mama surely misses me."

Lex wasn't disappointed. Not really. But he'd expected to have to persuade Henry to end their adventure.

"Yes, but we don't—" He broke off when he noticed the boy's drooping eyes. The lad was tired and wouldn't admit it; doing so would break the code of childhood—that much, Lex remembered.

He jumped up and reached a hand out. “Let’s go then.”



Chapter Seventeen



By mutual agreement, Lex and Henry visited the park each of the next two days, spending an hour or two playing cricket, walking the paths in search of creatures great and small to inspect, and naturally, spinning until they were dizzy. On this late afternoon, as Henry had slowed down considerably from fatigue, the walk back took longer than expected, but the pair did finally exit the gate. Outside, the hustle and bustle of the street jarred the senses. Peddlers and newsboys crowded the pavement, all shouting to make their products known above the others.

Lex spied a small girl holding a basket. He bent down to Henry. "Would you like an orange?"

Henry smiled and nodded, perking up at the offer of a treat. Lex guided him over to the girl and let him pick one.

As Lex handed over payment, Henry pointed to flowers also nestled in the basket. "Mama would like those."

"She would?" Lex asked. He had his doubts—the blossoms were rather small and wilted. Most women did like flowers, though, and they would make a nice token along with the sketch of Henry he'd drawn today. Still, he could send a footman to buy something much grander from the Covent Garden market.

The orange girl sniffled and said, "Jus' a ha'penny a posy, m'lord."

Then again, a bunch of small posies gathered together and freshened up with water might look sweet. Lex pressed a shilling into her hand. "I'll take all of them."

She scooped the flowers up without hesitation and handed them over. Lex thanked her. He'd have bought all the oranges, too, if they could have carried them. Instead, he'd send back a footman.

Henry followed suit and thanked the girl for the orange.

Despite all the items they bore, Lex made Henry take his hand before they crossed the street. They made it without incident and soon entered the house, where a footman relieved them of their sporting equipment.

Behind them, Bickley closed the door. "My lord, her ladyship wished me to tell you she has gone to visit Mrs. Robson."

Henry's mouth turned down. Lex, too, had wanted to see Eleanor, but he hoped his face didn't look the same. He wasn't *that* disappointed by her absence.

He held out his hand. "Thank you, Colonel, for another splendid adventure."

"You too, sir," the boy said, returning the handshake enthusiastically. "Will I see you at bedtime?"

"Given your propensity for sleeping in a bed other than your own, I wouldn't doubt it."

Clutching his orange and grinning madly, Henry raced up to the nursery.

Turning, Lex held out a half crown to Bickley. "There's an orange girl across the street. Send one of the footman to buy what she has left. The servants can share them."

Bickley nodded and took the coin. He opened his mouth once then closed it before any words came out. He tried again. "You have visitors, my lord."

Lex tried to hide his surprise, though Bickley obviously hadn't. The Robsons were occupied elsewhere, and no one else was likely to visit after that disastrous scene the other night. Drummond was due to come later this evening, an invitation Lex still regretted making.

"Who?" he asked.

"Mr. and Mrs. Dryden."

Eleanor's parents? Not again. They called on him every few months, and the three of them would stare awkwardly at each other for five minutes. While Lex had noticed that Mrs. Dryden never mentioned Eleanor, Mr. Dryden always spoke fondly of her, and Lex had mastered the art of avoiding outright lies while still hiding the disastrous state of their marriage. Knowing full well her daughter lived apart from Lex, but not why, Mrs. Dryden would eventually pounce and not-so-subtly urge her husband to ask Lex for money. To cut the visit and their questions short, Lex always agreed without hesitation, even though he knew he shouldn't support

Dryden's irresponsible spending habits.

Bickley held out his hand. "Shall I take those flowers for one of the maids to arrange?"

Lex stared at the limp blooms in his hand. "No, thank you, I'll attend them myself. Please inform Mr. and Mrs. Dryden that I will be with them shortly."

He needed to change his coat and breeches, at the least, as half of Hyde Park seemed to have come back with him. And if Eleanor returned in the time it took him to freshen up, all the better.



ELEANOR ACCEPTED THE footman's assistance and alighted from the carriage. Her second visit to the Robsons'—to Portia really—had gone much as the first. Meaning, her sister-in-law refused to hear her brother's name and had no plans to return to Lexden House. How had Portia said it? *I might return to Somerset on my own. There is nothing here for me now except humiliation and shame.*

Bickley anticipated Eleanor's arrival and threw open the door. She nodded in thanks, but her thoughts were as yet with Portia. She feared the girl might do something rash. More rash than returning to Somerset on her own. Of course, Justine had vowed to be extra vigilant, and Eleanor had faith in her friend, so honestly she should put Portia aside and focus on the upcoming confrontation with William Drummond, which was ignominiously planned for that evening.

"My lady."

She was halfway up the stairs when Bickley spoke. Slightly embarrassed that she'd handed him her hat and gloves and not said a word, Eleanor spun around on the ball of her foot. "Yes?"

"Lord Lexden asked that you join him in the drawing room as soon as you returned."

The drawing room? Immediately? That sounded formal and ominous. She and Octavius had been in a state of uneasy stasis, keeping their conversation on neutral topics such as Henry or the weather. Drummond wouldn't be here for hours yet, so this probably was not about him. What had Henry done? Or, what had Octavius done?

She continued up the steps, though not nearly as enthusiastically, and turned down the corridor toward the drawing room. There she heard multiple voices.

Visitors? Surely not.

Then she heard her mother's strident voice.

"Imagine my surprise when I heard from Mrs. Litton that your countess had made a rare appearance in London. One should hear these things from one's own daughter, especially as we saw Eleanor not four weeks ago and she mentioned not one word of traveling to town."

Oh dear God. The last thing they needed was a visit from Eleanor's parents. She peeked into the room. Her mother sat in a wing chair looking sour. Eleanor contemplated turning around and marching upstairs, but a movement opposite her mother drew her eye. Her father had come too. If only he were the kind of man who could provide a buffer between mother and daughter...

"Eleanor? Is that you?"

She must have made a small noise. Drat. Why did Octavius have to sound so desperate?

Throwing her shoulders back, she waded into the deep. Sunlight shimmered through the window that faced Hyde Park. The trees beyond, their leaves that deep green of summer, created a colorful mural for the pale room. The cheerful ambience did not suit the awkwardness permeating the room.

Octavius, resplendent in black breeches and a burgundy superfine coat, lounged against the mantel. She could have sworn his eyes brightened at the sight of her.

Her father had just settled his large frame into one of the armchairs. When he saw Eleanor, a delighted smile broke upon his face and he heaved himself up once more, arms open. "My dear! It has been too long."

She didn't hesitate to step into his embrace. Her father had many flaws, but Eleanor still cared for him. As the only parent who'd ever shown her any affection or attention, how could she not? "Papa, I've missed you."

Over her father's shoulder, she spied her mother, spine straight, every grey hair accounted for in her meticulous chignon, occupying one of the cream-colored velvet sofas. Eleanor stepped back and nodded.

"Mother."

She didn't know what else to say. Though her marriage to the wealthy Earl of Lexden had somewhat tempered her mother's bitterness over the birth of a mere daughter, Eleanor could never

forget all the times her mother blamed her for the deplorable state of the family finances.

Her mother gave her the barest of nods, and then her light brown eyes quickly strayed back to Octavius. *His* face had settled into its usual scowl, and Eleanor turned away.

"I hear you've brought your sister to town, Lexden," her mother said, as politely as could be, but Eleanor saw a gleam in her eye that was not to be trusted.

Apparently, Octavius sensed the trap, too. He hesitated overlong before saying, "Yes, Portia has joined us. Eleanor, won't you sit down?"

She would so much rather run off and find Henry. Blast it, she would rather run off and take the scullery maid's place.

Blushing, she backed up until her calves hit the other sofa and she sank onto it. Usually social calls only lasted a short time, but these were her parents. They could, and would, stay as long as they liked, whether it was socially acceptable or not. It wasn't as if she had invited them to visit, but her mother, well-attuned to gossip, would have known the minute her daughter and Henry arrived in London.

"It's a pleasure to see *you* in town, Eleanor," her father said, his hands resting on his belly.

"Is there an auspicious occasion we are unaware of?" Her mother smiled up at Octavius.

"Not at all. I...I simply wished to have my family with me." More twisted words had surely never been spoken by Octavius, but he surprised Eleanor by skirting the sofa and lowering himself beside her.

As surreptitiously as possible, she slid closer to the other end.

He narrowed his eyes.

She faced her parents, waiting for her mother to blame her for the debacle at the Ardmores', for Eleanor was always the one to blame. How grand would it be if, just this once, Octavius accepted responsibility for their troubles? But, Eleanor almost laughed at herself. Her husband was not going to defend her to her mother.

It was her father who ended up speaking, addressing Octavius after shifting in his chair. "And you never wished it these past six years?"

Eleanor looked up, surprised. Her father was known as the exact opposite of confrontational.

“Now, Mr. Dryden,” her mother interjected with a hint of derision. “A man can only find solace in familial connections that provide warmth, consideration, and comfort. Who are we to question the rejection of the very opposite of those qualities.”

This last was not a question at all, but both a cut at Eleanor and an admonition her father accepted with his usual meekness. He seemed to sink further into his chair as he nodded in agreement.

Octavius stiffened and looked from Eleanor’s mother to Eleanor, surprised. Of course, in the early days of their marriage, her mother had been ecstatic about the connection to the title and wealth of her new son-in-law; so ecstatic that she buried her lifelong bitterness toward her daughter and deigned to treat Eleanor with a dollop of appreciation. That brief interlude would have been all Octavius saw of their relationship.

It had indeed been brief. Once Eleanor was cast away and the connection to the Lexden prestige and fortune nearly severed, her mother’s resentment had returned in even greater force. For, naturally, Eleanor was to blame for the disintegration of the marriage.

“I am most grateful that Eleanor returned to London to help me entertain some acquaintances from America,” Octavius offered in a quiet yet firm voice that brooked no disagreement. “I’m especially glad she brought our boy Henry. She has done an exceptional job of bringing the child up. He’s a sharp lad who enjoys cricket but not, to his late surprise, fishing.”

Eleanor must be in need of an ear trumpet, but the phrase “our boy” caused a prickle of warmth to bloom in her chest. Just a fortnight ago Octavius had called his son a by-blow, and now he sounded—dare she think it—proud?

“You are blessed indeed to have a son,” her mother proclaimed, then slumped in her chair and put a hand to her bodice in a display of profound melancholy. “Mr. Dryden and I were denied that beautiful and bountiful gift. If I had but known that the birth of one child would preclude the blessing of more... Well, I know it is useless to dwell on the past, but I can’t help but daily mourn the loss of comfort and support a son could have provided. Oh!” A grievous sigh. “And poor Mr. Dryden with no heir to his name...”

At this, Octavius turned and stared at Eleanor, his eyebrows attaining a grand height. Had her mother truly never bemoaned the lack of a son to him? She knew her parents occasionally visited

Octavius here in London because her mother always made mention of it in her letters and generally underlined the words three times. Eleanor had always wished those visits to be as painful for her erstwhile husband as possible.

She bit her cheek, wishing she had not come back from the Robsons. She and Portia could have huddled there together, basking in the compassionate care of Justine. But no, Eleanor had wanted to see Octavius and Henry, to hear how their most recent grand adventure had gone.

“Eleanor, you are not attending me.” Her mother’s voice cracked across the room. “You know, my dear, if you’ve brought Lady Portia here to find a husband, you are going to have be more circumspect in your behavior. I’ve heard the most disturbing piece of news...”

Eleanor’s stomach clenched, and only the footman’s timely entrance with refreshments stopped her from saying words she might—or might not—regret. As the servant eased the heavy tray onto the table, she popped upright and said, “I’m sure we would all love some tea after that robust conversation. And look, Octavius, Cook has sent some of that plum cake you love. And you too, Papa. Let me just get everything ready and then...”

She was babbling, but it was either speak inanities or screech at her mother in frustration. She hurried to the other side of the room.

Surprisingly, Octavius jumped up and strode toward her. His eyes burned with anger. “Let me assist you,” he said loudly, but once he was close he lowered his voice so only she could hear. “I wish you would have warned me you’d invited your parents.”

Of course. She was to blame for this too. “If I *had* invited them, I would have told you.”

She dashed tea into each of the four cups. Octavius splashed sugar into each one.

“My mother doesn’t take sugar.”

“What a shame.” He deliberately dropped more cubes into one of the cups. “Is she trying to blame *you* for the scandal the other night?”

“Trust me, it would be the least of my sins.”

“Eleanor...?”

Intent on slicing the cake, she didn’t immediately look up, but Octavius whispered her name again and it was as if the murmured syllables physically lifted her chin. Those brown eyes were still fuming, but his mouth was turned down in concern. The knife

slipped out of her hand and clattered on the plate as she realized he wasn't angry with her. He was angry *on her behalf*.

Oh. That was a delicious feeling. She wanted to drink in that look on his face for an eternity, let it fill her up and sustain her lifeblood.

No. This was a dangerous feeling. It could suck the very lifeblood out of her.

Somehow, she tore her gaze away from his face and carried two cups of tea over to her parents. Then she sat. "Here we are. Now, Father, how has your health been?"

"I am quite well. A nagging cough every now and again. Oh, thank you." He broke off when Octavius offered him a slice of cake and tucked into it without another word.

Handing her mother a plate as well, Octavius returned to sit beside Eleanor, much closer than before. As she had sat close to the sofa's arm, she regrettably could put no distance between them. She could feel the heat of his thigh through her muslin gown and racked her brain, trying to think of a way to convince her parents to leave so that she might escape both them and her husband. With them pressing her from both sides she could barely breathe.

Octavius broke the silence. "Eleanor is refurbishing the sitting room. It truly was shabby and in need of new decoration. Tell us what you plan, Eleanor."

He couldn't possibly want to hear her ideas on redecorating. She stole a glance at him to see if he was teasing, but he looked genuinely ready to listen. This was a safe topic after all. "Well, I—"

"Speaking of decorations," her mother interrupted, "Mr. Dryden and I have decided that our bedchamber must be re-carpeted. The current one is so threadbare and I dread the cold winter days to come. I fear Mr. Dryden will suffer another terrible illness as he did last February if we don't ensure the room is adequately insulated. Indeed, I'm sure the curtains should be replaced too. These things are just so expensive."

Her father grunted an "Indeed."

Her mother nodded and opened her mouth, but Octavius spoke first. "Eleanor is also planning a ball. I cannot imagine what an undertaking that must be, but I don't doubt that the whole affair will come off smoothly."

Eleanor stared at him, or at his profile, for he was giving her mother the famous Mayne scowl. She felt as if she were flushing

from the inside out. This wasn't her husband. He would never do this, be so lavish with praise and interest.

Her mother, back as ramrod straight as ever, looked down her nose at Eleanor. "Are you certain that's wise? Please tell me your departure from the Ardmores' soiree the other night was not as rude and scandalous as some have made it out."

Octavius bristled like an enraged cat, surprising Eleanor further, and he slipped his hand into hers. His breathing grew shallower. Through a clenched jaw he said, "I am not certain exactly what gossip you have been listening to, Mrs. Dryden, but the incident at the soiree was entirely my fault. I made an ass of myself and embarrassed my wife, my sister, and my friends. Eleanor did her best to minimize the damage, for which I am most grateful."

She wanted to kiss him. Pin him to the sofa and kiss him. He was battling her mother. *For her.*

Instead, Eleanor managed to rise steadily to her feet and face her parents. In all the turmoil caused by their arrival, she'd forgotten the perfect pretext to get rid of them—Drummond's impending call. Granted, he wasn't due for a few hours and she wasn't keen to exchange one for the other, but it would do for an excuse.

"Mother, Papa, we have a previous engagement we need to prepare for. We very much appreciate your visit and are pleased to see you in good health."

Octavius stood just behind her, silent but overwhelmingly present. Eleanor caught herself leaning back and jerked upright.

Her father got to his feet, tidying his mouth with a napkin. "Pleasure to see you both again." He squeezed Eleanor's hands and kissed her on the cheek.

Her mother's tea cup was set aside with precision. "Of course your other appointment takes precedence. We are only your parents...." She stayed seated, continuing, "If you care to see us maintain our good health, it is imperative we redo the bedchamber. I don't suppose you would help with the expense?"

Eleanor's mouth fell open at her mother's shamelessness, but before she could even think what to say, Octavius crossed to the door and said, "We certainly do not want either of you to suffer a health crisis. Funds will be transferred to your bank immediately." Then, waving, he added, "The footman will see you out. Good day, Mr. and Mrs. Dryden."

Eleanor's mother curtsied as she passed, smiling smugly. "Thank you, Lexden. We'll be sure to keep an eye out for the invitation to your ball."

Eleanor had to give Octavius credit for stoically refraining from replying.

Once her parents had exited, her husband closed the door, securing the latch with care. She was only surprised he didn't lock it. The words "I'm sorry" were nearly formed on her lips before she came to her senses and bit them back. She had nothing to apologize for—she hadn't invited her parents and she certainly hadn't made her mother the woman she was. Though, if you asked her mother, you would receive an entirely different story.

Octavius turned, his fingers cupping her elbow. "How can she treat you so? I thought her sly requests for financial assistance were abominable but that was... That was..."

Eleanor shrugged, conveniently easing her arm away from his touch. His outrage was a beguiling thing, but the parallels between the way her mother treated her and the way Octavius had treated her for so long renewed her vulnerability. Could he not see the similarities? So she strove to remain dispassionate as always, though a twinge of sadness penetrated her heart.

"She has always been this way. I've learned to ignore her."

Ignoring her was easy enough to do when not in her presence, but this afternoon her mother's contempt had once again sapped Eleanor's confidence. She'd not been able to say much in her own defense. "I invite them to Mayne Castle twice a year out of duty. The unfortunate thing is that I cannot invite my father by himself. Much as I would like to see more of him, he won't be separated from my mother."

Octavius drummed his fingers along the top of the sofa. "They call here at least quarterly, though I have never issued a direction invitation." His gaze snapped to Eleanor's face. "Did you give them your pin money?"

Just a few days ago she would have interpreted his words as an accusation, but now she couldn't convince herself criticism existed beneath them. Octavius was making conversation; he was attempting to connect with her in a manner that didn't involve blame or scorn. And they were talking in broad daylight, not in the dark of night where the shadows hid much. Her heartbeat thrummed faster than usual, as this was a new and frightening

situation. Almost pleasant.

“My mother always badgers me for money, even via letter.” She lifted her gaze to Octavius’s. “You paid my father’s debts when we married, but that hasn’t stopped him from accumulating more. He is a spendthrift and can’t be trusted with so much as a shilling in his pocket. My mother, too, has always been intent on rising above her friends and neighbors, so she’s always wanting something new. Mostly I give her the pin money so she’ll stop hounding me. Though, I can’t believe she so brazenly solicited those funds just now.”

Octavius furrowed his brow. “She does it every time they visit.”

Eleanor sighed. She should have known her mother wouldn’t settle for pin money when there was so much more to be had. “She’s been bleeding both of us for six years?”

Her husband paused. “I would hesitate to call it bleeding, as I don’t miss the funds at all.” His gaze strayed to Eleanor ever so briefly. “I gave them the money in the hopes they wouldn’t question our marriage too closely.”

So, a bribe of sorts. Eleanor wasn’t surprised, and honestly she couldn’t quibble with his actions since she had succumbed to her mother’s requests for equally less than stellar reasons. But, their marriage, that wretched state that had arisen out of his asking and her agreeing... *Why* had he asked for her hand? She peeked up at him through her lashes. Hands on the back of the sofa, shoulders stretching his burgundy coat wide, he waited for her to respond. So, here was her chance to ask for the truth. But was she ready for the answer? Did she have the courage to hear it?

Flattening her hands over her stomach, she took the plunge. “Octavius, why did you ask me to marry you?”

His eyebrows climbed in surprise as he straightened. “Why?”

She nodded.

“I...” He took another step back and then turned to pace toward the fireplace. Obviously he wasn’t quite ready to look her in the eye while discussing their marriage, or more rightly so, his feelings, but Eleanor found she didn’t mind; she simply wanted an answer. An honest answer.

Head bowed, he stared into the low-burning fire. “I had to marry you.”

“That’s absurd. It isn’t as if you compromised me. We barely knew each other.”

He pivoted to face her. "It's over and done with, Eleanor. It's not important why we married. We have to live with the consequence anyway."

Eleanor steeled herself against the defensive reaction which instinctively rose up and connected with his gaze. "It's important to me."

"I'm certain I explained it to you at the time."

Why was his jaw burnished that deep red? Eleanor mustered some patience. *Keep the words flowing.* "No, you never asked me directly. You relayed the message through my father. Remember? He handled the negotiations, as it were."

"Well, yes. It was a straightforward deal. I paid off his debts."

"But what did you get in return? Why did you even initiate this deal, Octavius?"

He threw up his hands and stalked to the window. The sun shining through the panes reflected off his polished Hessians. "You are a true plague, do you know that?"

But, there was no heat in his words. Eleanor flashed a grin that she quickly hid lest he turn around. He was avoiding the question, which meant the answer was important to him too.

She repeated herself. "What did you get in return?"

"You."

That one syllable snatched the very breath from her lungs. Enthralled, she took a step toward him. Then another. At the third step, her shin hit the rosewood occasional table.

The pain was negligible but enough to rouse her from her reverie. Now wasn't the time to be led by her heart or other dubious organs. Now was the time for discovery, so she tried to focus her thoughts. "But *why* did want me?"

She hated how pleading that sounded.

"For St. Bartholomew's sake!" Her husband's face flushed a dark, mottled red, and as he pressed both hands to his temple Eleanor wondered if she really would kill him with her need to talk. He stared out the window for the longest time. She herself said nothing, afraid to prompt him. Afraid he wouldn't answer. Afraid he would.

At last he turned toward her, his color returning to normal. "I apologize if anything I'm about to say wounds you. It is the truth, and I can only surmise from your persistence that you want the truth." He blew out a breath while Eleanor held perfectly still. "I

never had any intention of marrying. Not after witnessing my parents' destructive attempt at the state. Then I ran into you that day in Bloomsbury." He looked up at the coffered ceiling. "You were so pretty, so...full of life. I never would have guessed your circumstances to be as wretched as they were. I told myself to walk away. Commanded it, actually." He tipped his head back down, finding her gaze. "Next thing I knew I was asking you to walk in Green Park. I wanted you desperately. I won't deny that. I...I also despised myself for it and never wanted to see you again. I'd made a vow not to marry, for very good reasons. The debate—no, war—raging inside my head nearly felled me. I realized marriage was the only option: You were an honorable, respectable woman. I also knew any marriage of mine would be disastrous."

Eleanor waited. She'd expected much worse, had braced herself not to flinch. Instead, she'd had to tighten her muscles to keep a shiver from lancing through her. Octavius Rupert Henry Mayne had complimented her. Had wanted her. *Desperately*. Had called her honorable and respectable.

A giddy feeling spiraled through her stomach.

"Please, proceed." Somehow, she said the words with a touch of primness, though she dearly wanted to shout them with unseemly eagerness despite knowing exactly how this story ended. So did he, for reluctance flashed across his face, though he drew in a breath and continued.

"I told myself 'no' a thousand times, and yet still I found myself sitting in front of your father negotiating the marriage settlements." His gaze flicked to her and then away again. "I made certain you were out. I was too much of a coward to ask you directly, so I asked him for your hand. I wanted you, Eleanor. Against all wisdom and sense. I couldn't stop myself. *I had to marry you.*"

How she kept herself from rushing into his arms at that moment, Eleanor didn't know. But at his next words, she was grateful to have refrained.

"I regretted marrying you the minute we signed the register. I've regretted it every day thereafter."

This wasn't news to her. She'd lived with his regret, after all. And her own. Still, her heart flinched and that earlier giddiness dropped like a stone into her stomach. Eleanor slid to the left and dropped onto the sofa, unmindful of how she was creasing the skirt of her dress. But there seemed to be no stopping Octavius now. He

kept talking.

“That regret intensified day after day until I saw how much time you spent in Drummond’s company. And then he made that sly remark about bedding you, and you announced you were increasing soon after. I was reliving my father’s life firsthand.”

The hoarseness in his voice cut through Eleanor as all the days of their marriage resurfaced in her mind. Now knowing his past, she couldn’t quite blame him for what had transpired. She wished he’d thought otherwise, taken other actions, spoken different words, but she couldn’t fully blame him—not for the past or for his honesty.

“Thank you.” She hated that the words tumbled out unsteadily. “For answering my question with such frankness. I wouldn’t have wished anything else.”

Ha. Liar.

She wished for far more: a tender embrace while he softly apologized for every horrible thing he’d done and every caustic word he’d spoken, a gruff plea for forgiveness, a kiss to wipe out every memory.

“Eleanor...” He stepped around the sofa. His black, wool-clad thighs came into view. She could feel the contrition radiating from his core, from his heart, and it unleashed a panic in her so fierce it snatched her breath away. She was so afraid to take the next step.

She jumped up and nearly ran to the door. “I must...” No excuse came to mind, so over her shoulder she said, “I must go. Thank you again.”

Then she gathered her skirts and escaped, running up the stairs with unladylike speed.



Chapter Eighteen



“Mama!” Henry was waiting for her at the top of the stairs, but Octavius’s words thrashed about in her head, begging to be heard again.

“Mama?”

Eleanor shook her head and held out her hand. “Come along, sweet pea. I want to hear about your day.”

Her son beamed up at her and let her lead the way to her bedchamber.

Eleanor settled into the chair by the empty fireplace and pulled him onto her lap. He was getting so big, she could barely hold him anymore. He was tall, if not as broad as his father. At least not yet. She could imagine how much alike the two of them would look once Henry was grown. By then would this relationship they were forging be a solid one they could both rely on...?

She gave Henry a light squeeze. “What did you do at the park?”

He began to describe a game of cricket, and she let her head fall back against her chair. His voice ran high with excitement, but the recitation was hypnotic nonetheless. He moved on to the describe his first foray at fishing, and she smiled against his head tucked up against her shoulder. Every sentence he uttered about his father was a positive one. He didn’t complain about anything Octavius had done or said, and as Henry finished, babbling some nonsense about spinning and falling, she was hard-pressed to keep her smile at a non-foolish level. Whatever else their stay in London accomplished, at least her husband had acknowledged their son and taken an interest in him.

She cupped her hand around Henry’s. “Did you have a good time?”

“Yes.” He sat up straighter, nodding vigorously. “Perhaps you

could come next time. Though you wouldn't like the spinning. Or the cricket."

"I might very well like cricket, young man."

He screwed up his features in a way that indicated he didn't think so, but the look was so comical that Eleanor had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

His reply was as solemn as a sermon. "You can try it, then, if you wish. Though it won't be easy to run in that dress."

"Probably not," she said, just as seriously.

"Oh! I need to find the earl's bat." Henry leapt off her lap. "Mr. Carter made him a bat just like he did for me. Isn't that odd? I thought the earl never came to Mayne Castle."

"Hmm." Eleanor kissed her boy on the cheek. "He hasn't lately, but it sounds like he used to."

"He should really come again. I have to find that bat."

Henry executed a perfect bow and then ran out the door. Eleanor sat and smiled for an unhealthy amount of time; then she remembered her son's father and everything that had passed between them just a short while ago. She slumped in her chair. She wasn't being fair to Octavius. He wanted to apologize for how misled he'd been in his past behavior, and he'd even shown in these last two days that he was sincere. That he could step outside the harsh, bitter shadow he'd been cast in. Had *wallowed* in. But she hadn't let him.

She rose and paced the room. Though the late afternoon sun brightened the walls and furnishings, everything blurred before her. The fear that niggled at the back of her brain—at the back of her heart—hadn't disappeared. Octavius could overpower her. Not physically but emotionally. She was in a considerable amount of danger.

And yet... He seemed changed. He wanted her there for the confrontation with Drummond. He'd overcome his fears and taken Henry to the park. He had defended her to her mother. He'd *wanted* to marry her and had said as much. So Eleanor stopped pacing, closed her eyes and exhaled, knowing what she must do—what she wanted to do, despite the hazardous possibilities of the outcome.

When she opened her eyes, a flash of color atop the counterpane caught her attention. She tilted her head then went over to investigate. A small bouquet of flowers reclined on the bed, propped up by the pillow.

Upon closer inspection, they were a rather wilted bunch of pansies, daisies, and violets. Still, she picked them up and admired their cheerful color. Henry must have left them as a gift for her. She was only surprised he hadn't mentioned them. Then she noticed the folded sheet of paper lying atop the pillow that the flowers had partially covered.

She lifted the paper and unfolded it, trying not to drop the flowers in the process. Most of them fell to the carpet anyway when she gripped the paper in amazement, staring at the strikingly accurate and oh-so-beautiful sketch. Henry smiled back at her, his dimple perfectly placed and his cowlick twisting just so. She'd never had a portrait of her son painted, but while these lines and shading might not be called fine art, she already cherished this as better than all others.

On the back of the sketch, having used a pencil, Octavius's script appeared less harsh:

Eleanor,

You have not let me say so, but I apologize for the cruel assumptions I made about your character and Henry's paternity. I cannot blame you for thinking me a beast. Though I've not given you much reason to believe it, I am not so lost to humanity as to be incapable of admitting when I've wronged someone. I am truly sorry.

She turned the paper over again and smiled at the image of Henry. Then her gaze strayed to the bottom right corner where the artist had signed it:

Octavius.

The sketch trembled in her fingers. *Octavius, not Lex.* Henry's image blurred just the slightest bit; she brushed the back of her wrist across her eyelids. She should have known Octavius wouldn't obey her, would apologize one way or the other. Just this once, she'd let him have his way.

She drew in a breath. An apology had been offered. She would accept it. She only hoped she could bear the consequences.

Gathering the flowers from the floor, Eleanor clutched them to her chest along with the sketch. Now, to find her husband.



LEX WAS LEFT IN THE drawing room, alone and confused, by Eleanor's abrupt departure. He'd thought things were going well. His explanation of why he'd married her had been a tad severe, but

he'd warned her he wasn't going to paint the truth in a gilded light. He would have thought Eleanor wanted nothing less.

Under other circumstances, he probably would not have admitted how rash and sentimental he'd been in marrying Eleanor. After the way her mother treated her, he'd been compelled to offer his wife the one thing he could: honesty. In her astonishment, Eleanor hadn't the wherewithal to further question his irrational behavior all those years, for which he was very grateful.

He stood there for some minutes, but when it was apparent she would not return he retreated to his study and closed the curtains, shutting out the obnoxious sunlight. He reminded himself—for the hundredth time in the last two hours—that he hadn't wanted a *wife*, even if he'd wanted Eleanor desperately.

As strange as it was to admit, the high point of his day had been the trip to the park with Henry. Everything else had been grim. His in-laws' visit was uncomfortable, more for Eleanor than him. And while his conversation with his wife had opened up new territory for them, at least in his view, it too had ended badly. Now he had to look forward to Drummond's call after dinner.

He wasn't given to excessive drinking, more's the pity, so to drown his sorrows he ordered a plate loaded with every wafer, biscuit, bun, and cake Cook had available. Once it was delivered, he tucked himself into the chair by the fireplace, settled the plate on his lap and began his overindulgence with a cinnamon biscuit.

He tried being angry with Eleanor for not accepting his apology—it was a habitual emotion he'd never had trouble expressing before—but he couldn't do it. She was under no obligation, even if he'd indulged in sentimentality. Licking the sugar from his fingers Lex admitted that, even before Drummond whispered so insidiously in his ear, he had turned his abiding regret on his wife in the form of coldness and neglect. To think now how deeply those actions must have cut Eleanor... Her mother had paid her scant attention, and her husband treated her even worse. Guilt soured his belly.

A footman tapped at the door and entered when commanded. "A note for you, my lord."

Lex took it and dismissed the servant. He nearly tossed it in the fire when he saw the seal with the imprinted script *D*.

Lexden,

While I can think of nothing more entertaining than spending an evening with you and my lo—beg pardon, your wife, I am afraid

something of more importance has arisen. I trust we can find another time to our mutual pleasure.

With warmest regards to you and to Lady Lexden,

W. Drummond

Lex crushed the note in his fist and then consigned it to the fire. This was nothing more than Drummond trying to wrest back the upper hand. The ignorant cur had no idea what Lex was about, but he'd made it clear he wasn't going to be led around like a pony on a rope.

Good. Drummond was worried. Let him stew for a day.

Mindlessly, Lex plucked another bun from the plate balanced on his lap and devoured it in two bites. The evening now stretched before him. Whatever goodwill he'd cultivated with Eleanor had apparently evaporated, so...perhaps Henry needed help reconstructing the Battle of Talavera.

Another rap sounded on the door, quieter and more hesitant than the footman's. Lex paused, throttling the hope that rose in his chest; Eleanor didn't want to talk to him right now. This was most likely a timid maid.

"Come."

The door opened, casting a triangle of light upon the carpet, but Lex was on the wrong side to see who stood there. That damned hope sprang up once more.

Eleanor.

She slipped into the room and closed the door, moving no farther, her hand still upon the latch as if ready to bolt at any second. Her other hand clutched the ragged bouquet he'd bought and the sketch he'd left her. Lex grabbed the plate off his lap and moved to stand.

"No, please don't," she said. Her voice cracked. "Just stay there."

A distance between them was a good idea. Wasn't it? "You left in a rush. Are you well?"

"No, not completely." She held up the picture. "Aside from Henry in the flesh, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It's lovely, as are your words. Thank you."

When she'd ordered him to remain seated, he'd frozen on the edge of the chair, still balancing the plate on his leg. The position was uncomfortable, as was the idea of sitting while speaking to a lady. But he didn't want the conversation or the pleasantness to end

so he must say something.

"You're welcome. I drew it while he was fishing. Obviously, he didn't look nearly that cheerful *after* he caught the blasted fish. He was devastated to think he might have killed the poor thing."

To his surprise, Eleanor chuckled and pushed away from the door. "He is insisting that fish be taken off the nursery menu."

Ingrained politeness and the fact there was only one chair had Lex rising again.

"Please, sit," she commanded. She neared him, bent, and pushed the unused upholstered footstool over in front of his chair. With a sweep of her gown, she perched on it and reached across to pluck a biscuit from his plate. "The ginger ones are my favorite. Which do you prefer?"

"The...the cinnamon, actually." His heart thumped at an unhealthy pace, as if they were discussing his wretched family history and not the flavor of confectionary.

She tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear and nibbled on her biscuit. He saw her mouth move but had no idea what she said. The firelight played along one side of her face, making her skin glow and her hair a burnished gold. Her eyes sparkled green and lively, but still he saw the wariness there, as if she were playing with a lion and wasn't certain when it would attack.

He wouldn't turn on her. Not this time.

"Octavius, you are not attending me." She tilted her head to catch his gaze, and when she did, she raised her eyebrows mockingly in imitation of her mother.

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I love to look at you."

She blushed an even more distracting shade of pink. "I asked if you were the artist whose sketch hangs in the sitting room." Shifting, she narrowed her eyes. "And in here. Is that Mayne Castle?"

He glanced over his shoulder, though he knew exactly what she admired. "Yes."

"You are very talented."

"They are just sketches," he said with a shrug, placing his nearly empty plate on the chair-side table. "I don't paint or do watercolors."

"I like your sketches." Her lips formed a circle. "Oh! Will you draw me?"

Eleanor, in the nude, stretched out provocatively by the fire

while he put pencil to paper? He could do that.

He shouldn't do that. Even as the image formed in his mind, her breasts and hips all tantalizingly curved and shaded, he knew it was a mistake. This tête-à-tête was about more than just carnal lusting. His brain knew that even if other parts didn't. He wasn't quite certain however, what that "more" was.

"The light isn't very good in here," he said in a pathetic attempt to turn her off the idea.

"Of course," she replied. "I should really go and tidy up before Drummond's visit." But the look of disappointment on her face so clearly read, *Oh yes, how silly, no one ever pays me any mind.*

Lex jumped up and yanked open a drawer in his desk. "Don't move. Drummond isn't coming. You actually make a perfect subject there in the firelight." He sounded like an idiot, but he wanted that look gone from her face. Banished forever.

He slipped a new sketchbook out of the drawer and grabbed a pencil, returning to his seat before she could even think about leaving.

"You don't have to—"

"I insist." He flipped the book open. "Turn your head to the left just a fraction."

Her brow furrowed. "Drummond isn't coming?"

Lex sighed. "You cannot talk while I'm sketching, Eleanor. It ruins the lines of your face. Hmph. Maybe I should do this more often."

She looked down her nose at him, and he smiled—which wasn't as painful as it used to be, especially around her and Henry. What in the hell were they doing to him?

"Drummond?" she prompted.

"Right. He sent a note saying he cannot come this evening. He's playing games, as usual. I think he's frightened, actually. After my display of temper the other night, he's likely not sure why I would want him in my home."

"We can't postpone speaking with him, Octavius. We don't know what either he or Portia will do next."

"I'll write him back and insist he come tomorrow." Lex lifted his pencil in the air. "Now hush so I can work. Look down, at the portrait of Henry. Yes, perfect."

She wore that smile again, the soft one that only came over her face when she looked at her son. Henry was so fortunate; Lex's

mother had never smiled at him in such a way. She hadn't ever been cruel or unkind to him while she lived at Lexden House, but neither had she been loving or caring. Lady Lexden had had her interests, and they hadn't involved her children or her husband. No, he admitted, she hadn't abused him, but she had helped destroy the person he'd loved most.

Shaking his head, Lex concentrating on getting his pencil strokes just right. Eleanor was nothing like his mother—or her own. She loved Henry, she did her best by Portia, she'd been faithful, and she always knew just how to help.

His chest constricted so tightly he could barely breathe, and his pencil fell slack in his fingers. He'd let her in. She'd battered her way past his strongest defenses, and he hadn't stopped her.

A great roaring assaulted his ears from within as he looked up at Eleanor. "What are we doing?"

The rasp in his voice must have caught her attention, for she lifted her lashes, revealing enormous pupils. "I don't know." She slipped forward and rested a hand on his cheek. He tried, God, how he tried not to move, but still his head turned just a fraction and his cheek nestled within that warm palm. Then she sucked in a small breath and leaned closer. "I have no idea. You've offered an apology and I'm accepting it. I think we should let the wind carry us where it will."

Her breath was against his lips as the gap between them disappeared. Her mouth touched his, and he closed his eyes and gave in.

Her kiss was soft but not tentative. Eleanor had never been shy in such matters. She slid her hand past his ear and threaded her fingers through his hair, tendering her acceptance of his apology just as he'd first offered it. But as he savored the hint of ginger on her lips, she broke contact.

"I'm very scared."

Lex hadn't opened his eyes. However, he heard the quaver in her voice and still felt the whisper of her breath upon his mouth. That forced him to admit, "Me too."

He'd regret that; he knew he would. At the moment, though, he couldn't hold anything back. Not from Eleanor, the wife he didn't want. He pressed forward, capturing her mouth once again, uniting their fears and joining their passion, and despite their qualms, their kiss was deliberate: slow and provocative. Lex touched his tongue

to her lips, and her fingers curled into his hair. Then she was gone.

He opened his eyes to find her sitting fully upright on the footstool, biting her lower lip. Coherent thoughts, and the power to express them, were still a few moments away, so Lex simply stared.

"I suppose I should have known the wind would carry us *that* way," she said softly. "I don't think we should... I just think we should focus on our weaknesses, not our strengths."

Our strengths? He'd made love to his wife exactly once in the last six years, but yes, of a certainty they should ignore these strong feelings and...talk. Again.

Lex sighed. He shouldn't be frustrated. He'd told himself the very same thing. At least he could put the pressure on her this way. "Tell me why your mother is the way she is."

Eleanor lifted a shoulder, surprised. After a moment she said, "I don't know."

Lex shook his head. He wasn't fooled by her feigned nonchalance; wariness had turned her eyes from green to a dull brown. "I'll fetch you some sherry if it will loosen your tongue, but you aren't going to avoid my question. You're the one who wanted to talk."

"You are willfully intrusive."

"A quality you clearly admire as you possess an abundance of it yourself," Lex replied with cheerful satisfaction. "Now, would you like that sherry?"

She nodded.

He rose, bumping his shin into her knee then saying, "Take the chair. You'll be more comfortable."

Stepping into the hall, he found and instructed the footman to bring sherry—and more wafers, which he would need if he wasn't allowed to touch Eleanor. Returning to the study, he found her curled up in the chair, her legs tucked beneath her bottom. Her slippers lay in a jumble on the carpet, as if she had kicked them off without a care.

He'd wanted her to be comfortable, not relaxed and alluring.

As he crossed to the dying fire, she reached for the sketchbook he'd left on the table. Veering over to snatch it away, he snapped, "I'm not finished with that."

She was too quick. He leaned over the back of the chair, intending to take the book back, but then he saw the look on her face. She held the sketch in front of her, lips parted, eyes bright,

and he pushed away and stalked to the fireplace to stir up the flames.

“Now do you see why I was distracted?” he asked.

“I don’t look like this.”

“You do to me.” Vivacious and bold, with a strong hint of compassion.

The footman tapped on the door. Lex retrieved the proffered tray and set it on the desk. Eleanor flipped the sketchbook closed and placed it back upon the table. Lex noted she hadn’t said if she liked the sketch.

Pouring some sherry, he carried it over and straddled the footstool. “Drink up, and speak up.”

The sherry disappeared before he could blink twice.

“You’re enjoying this too much,” his wife accused as she wiped her lips.

Not as much as Lex would enjoy kissing her again.

“Your mother,” he prompted.

Eleanor leaned her head against the chair and stared at the ceiling. “To say that she was exceedingly disappointed I was born a girl is an understatement. A great uncle of hers had bequeathed her a very handsome annuity if she gave birth to a son.” She lowered her head and leveled her gaze upon him. “I was not that son, and, in addition, my birth was so difficult that the possibility of any future children was out of the question.”

His wife’s dispassion was admirable. Lex would have been proud to speak of his mother in the same tone. And yet, what had a lack of feeling, what had keeping things buried ever done for the two of them but created more hurtful secrets?

“Do you hate her?” he asked.

She started. Then her eyelids rose and fell in a flurry as dark emotion shoved out the dispassion. “I used to.”

Surprised—he’d expected a swift and vehement “yes” that was perhaps more reflective of his feelings for his own mother—Lex slipped his hand beneath Eleanor’s and stroked his thumb over her knuckles. “What changed?”

“It was nothing so abrupt.” Her eyes focused on his arm, but Lex doubted she could see anything but her past. “I first saw a crack in her when my father was threatened with debtor’s prison. She had no one to rely on but me. That’s when I noticed the fear. She lives in constant terror of poverty and degradation. Her own family’s

finances were unstable, and my father's spendthrift ways, well... She wanted—and I can't really fault her for this—the son that would have provided her with security, a financial security a daughter might or might not have given her through marriage.”

“You're far more understanding than I,” Lex muttered. Then he realized just how hard he was squeezing her hand and let go.

She recaptured his fingers. “Because of Henry.”

“Henry? What's he to do with your mother? As it is, I'm amazed at how you've mothered the boy considering your example.”

“My reasoning is ridiculous.”

When she said nothing further, Lex raised his free hand in the air. “Your reasoning is your reasoning. It just *is*. So tell me how Henry changed your understanding of your mother.” He cut his gaze back to her. “Never tell me *you've* pinned all your hopes and dreams on Henry.”

“Absolutely not.” She picked at the sprigs on her gown. “I...love him so much. You can't imagine how deeply it would wound me if he hated me. I couldn't bear that. A child shouldn't hate their mother. I don't want Henry to see that. So...I can't. I just can't.”

Interesting, but not ridiculous, logic. Were feelings ever logical anyway? Lex had never felt there was any rhyme or reason to his own, which was why it was best not to examine them. They simply were.

“Very well,” he said, “you're not obligated to hate her, but I cannot understand why she hasn't changed her mind about you. You're a countess, for St. Bartholomew's sake! You're worth more than ten sons.” He paused, raising his eyes to her face. “And I don't just mean financially.”

Eleanor's cheeks glowed rosily in the firelight. The urge to kiss her—and more—hadn't disappeared. She leaned forward a fraction, and his hopes, not to mention his cock, sprang to life. Then she flopped back against the chair.

“Oh, she was ecstatic when I first married you, but then I ruined everything by getting sent away to Mayne Castle.”

“Eleanor...”

She shook her head, smiling wanly. “I know I wasn't to blame for that, but my mother wasn't going to blame *you*, the man with the money.” She paused. “At least she's nothing like your mother was. You win that battle.”

Lex shuddered. This conversation wasn't going to devolve into

one about his mother, nor was he going to spend another minute looking at a dejected Eleanor. "I was thinking...perhaps you and Henry would like to visit Astley's Amphitheatre the day after tomorrow."

Eleanor straightened and raised her eyebrows, saying nothing.

"With me."

Her smile could have blazed a hole through his heart. "We would love to! Though we daren't mention this to Henry before tomorrow. He would never sleep."

"He seems to do very well for himself in my bed."

A knock sounded at the door—the footman, blast him! The servant opened it a crack at Lex's command and said, "Dinner is served, my lord."

"Thank you," Lex replied, probably sounding most ungrateful. He had no desire to interrupt what he and Eleanor had going.

She rose as the door closed, and due to his close proximity she was trapped between his knees. Celibacy was one thing when she lived seventy-five miles away but quite another when her lavender scent swirled around him and he had only to tip his head up an inch to bury his face in her breasts. What was so wrong about exploiting a strength, again?

With much reluctance, he pushed back the footstool upon which he sat to give Eleanor room to pass. Even after moving, though, her muslin-clad belly hovered right in front of him, as if she'd moved closer instead of away. Then, suddenly, her hand was on his shoulder, sweeping up the back of his neck as she dropped to her knees between his thighs.

Her mouth met his, capturing it in a ferocious kiss. One flick of her tongue on his lips gained her entrance, and Lex gripped her hips and pulled her against the instant evidence of his arousal; he was more than wise enough not to mention her earlier wish to forego this kind of pleasurable congress.

She withdrew the pressure of her hand on his neck, but he wasn't going anywhere. He kissed her, possessively, ardently, trying to make up for all the years he'd stupidly believed Drummond. Intent on getting her out of her dress, he slid his hands up her back, lamenting the number of fasteners standing between him and a naked Eleanor. He stopped in shock when her hands found the buttons on the fall of his breeches and worked them loose, then yanked his shirt from the breeches and lowered the flap to release

his cock into her hands.

Sweet heaven, he nearly lost control. Might have, just a bit. Her circled fingers stroked him from head to base.

“Eleanor, don’t—”

“I’m sorry!” She withdrew her hands as if his cock were suddenly a hot, burning coal. “I know you hate it when I’m forward.”

He could barely see her through the lust clouding his vision, but he found her chin with his hand and raised her face to look at him. “Never,” he croaked. “Why would you think that? I like nothing better than when you follow your instincts.”

“It isn’t seemly,” she mumbled, lowering her eyes, shading her thoughts.

Never would he have guessed she was this insecure about her passion. It devastated him to think she didn’t realize how much he loved her boldness, so he stroked his thumb across her cheek. “What happens between us is neither seemly nor unseemly. It’s private. We can do whatever we wish, though I would hope you’d tell me if I did something you didn’t like.” He pressed his lips to hers briefly. “Ha, as if you *wouldn’t* tell me.”

Confusion muddled the color of her eyes. “You weren’t going to tell me to stop? You don’t mind that I’m brazen?”

“You are unabashed and impudent every other minute of the day. Why would I expect you to be less so now?”

“That isn’t the same as liking it.”

She sat back on her heels, releasing herself from his gentle grip, and Lex suddenly realized he was sitting there with his breeches hanging open. He pulled the flap back over his now shrunken yard, fighting hard not to show his disappointment. “I like it, Eleanor. I was trying to tell you ‘Don’t stop.’” He attempted a half-hearted smile at the irony that they had, indeed, stopped.

“Oh.” She stared at his knee, apparently deep in thought.

“Shall we go to dinner?” he proposed, though it was the last thing he wanted. Then he realized how he’d just asked Eleanor for honesty and here he was being anything but truthful. “No, actually, I’d like to start again. Would you?”

Rising up on her knees, she smiled tentatively, then a bit more saucily, then ran her hands along his thighs. “Absolutely.”

His cock responded as swiftly as before, but her hands took a different path and slid up inside his coat. She helped him shrug out

of the garment and tossed it over onto the desk. Next, she set to work on the buttons of his waistcoat.

Lex leaned over and scattered kisses along her neck, pausing to whisper in her ear, "How am I to get you out of that dress if you won't take your hands off me?"

Her lips skittered up to his ear. She nibbled on the lobe before replying, "You will just have to wait your turn. I started this, after all."

"And I am humbly appreciative."

Together they removed the waistcoat and his shirt. No sooner were they were tossed aside than she ran her hands up his bare chest, across his shoulders, and down his back, finally sealing herself against him. As she nipped little kisses along his shoulder, he reached around and began undoing her dress, but the distraction of her hot lips on his skin and her belly pressed up against his cock meant his fingers were quite inept at the task. He'd only unfastened two hooks when her wicked hands moved to his waist and captured the stiff length of him once more.

He was useless after that, and he had a sneaking suspicion Eleanor knew it—even reveled in it. She stroked him, experimenting with different methods, and all of them made his mind go numb. He could do no more than sit there, chin on her shoulder, as desire scorched through his veins.

"I love the way you feel," she said, as Lex groaned shamelessly. She leaned back to look at him and smiled, no doubt because he looked like a slaving idiot. "If I keep doing this, you will...spend your seed, won't you?"

His cock pulsed in her hands. Somehow, he got his brain to issue a command and he grabbed her, stilling them. "Yes, but not now." He'd spent six years finding release with his own hand. He wanted to be inside her. More than that, he wanted their pleasure to be mutual. "I want you. With fewer clothes on. You, me, together."

Barely functional words, hardly poetic, but they achieved the goal he wanted. Eleanor backed away and turned around so he could finish unhooking her gown. He did a slapdash job of it, may have even ripped one or two hooks, but that's what lady's maids were for. His fingers shook as he lowered the dress around her shoulders. She stood and stepped out of it, shedding her petticoat soon after. Only her stays and chemise remained.

She made to kneel in front of him again, but he stopped her.

"That can't be comfortable. We can lie by the fire."

"No." She sank to her knees again and said nothing more.

Too eager to contemplate her refusal, Lex got her stays off and she pulled her chemise over her head. Before she had it all the way off, he had his hands on her hips, smoothing them down to caress her firm cheeks. As soon as the white linen hit the carpet, though, Eleanor turned, disengaging his hands.

He moved to stand and remove his boots and breeches, but she took steps toward him, set her hands on his shoulders and held him in place. He looked up but had no time to speak as she braced herself on his shoulders and climbed onto his lap, straddling him. His blood roared.

She bit her lip in obvious worry, so he had to say something. "You have the best ideas, Eleanor."

In thanks, she kissed him and rubbed herself against his overly enthusiastic cock. He had no inclination to think after that. While he plunged his tongue into her mouth, she lifted herself onto him, sinking slowly and seductively farther down until he thought he might explode with just that one stroke.

He didn't, and thank God, for she threw her head back and began to pump up and down in a raw rhythm that sent his head spinning. He was so close, but even through the blurry haze of arousal he could tell Eleanor wasn't there yet. He slipped his hands up to her breasts, momentarily regretting he hadn't spent more time there already, and rubbed his thumbs across their sensitive peaks.

Her moans began as a low hum. They grew louder as she thrust her lithe body up and down until at last she erupted, and he gripped her ribs to keep her from falling as wave after wave of pleasure rippled through her.

"Eleanor," he groaned, "my wanton Eleanor."

On her final plunge, as she clenched around him, he gave himself up to his own release. She collapsed against him, and he gripped her bottom as he continued to pulse inside her.

At length, his senses returned. They were both breathing hard, Eleanor more so. He planted a kiss on her salty neck. "I still have my boots on."

"That's more sensual than it sounds," she whispered, lifting her head.

"Oh, really?"

"Except that I don't think I'll be able to walk tomorrow if I stay

in this position much longer.”

“Thank goodness there are other positions,” he ventured.

She rewarded him with a smile. “What about dinner?”

“Are you hungry?” *Please say no.*

She shook her head, which was enough for him. Lex stood and carried her over to the fireplace, easing her down to the carpet where he stretched out beside her and pulled her close.

“Do you realize all your hairpins are still in place?” he asked, leaning in and pulling the first one out.

She closed her eyes. As he continued removing the pins, her body became soft and pliant against his. Her breathing evened out. He plucked free the last, thinking she had dozed off, then her lips curved into a smile that was satiated with a hint of wistfulness. “This is perfect.”

This. So innocuous-sounding, and yet her words unleashed a tremor of fear up his spine. “This” was more than just physical gratification, and the full implications eluded him. So he had to ask again.

“Eleanor, what are we *doing*?”

She sucked in a muted breath, as if she knew the answer despite her earlier protestation of ignorance. Her eyes were big and soft, a greenish gold that called to him and chilled his blood at the same time. He looked away.

Standing, she tugged at his hand. “Let’s retire for the evening. We can have dinner sent to my chamber. Then I think we could both benefit from a sound night’s sleep.”

He might benefit from a few hours’ brooding in his study, too, accompanied by more buns and cake. But even without acknowledging the sly shadow in Eleanor’s eye that suggested one other activity that might be included in that agenda, Lex knew which choice he would make.

Fool to the last.

“As you wish, my lady.”

They made themselves somewhat presentable and then dashed out the door and up the stairs. Eleanor was giggling breathlessly by the time they reached her bedroom. Lex chuckled along with her as she toppled onto the bed, but that frisson of panic still lingered and so instead of joining her he said, “I’ll ring for a tray.”

She popped back up. “I’m going to change and then see how Henry is faring.”

The boy was fine, obviously, and much later, after they had dined on turbot in lobster sauce, with a few teasing references to Henry's new aversion to fish, they prepared to retire.

As he extinguished the candles one by one, Lex knew what he had to do. He had to give Eleanor a chance to question him. Not only because he'd done the same to her, but because he still owed her a penance for his outburst. So, as he snuffed the last candle between his thumb and forefinger and slipped between the bed linens, he said, "It is your turn."

"Oh, for what?"

Why did she sound so animated? He managed to unclench his teeth. "To ask me a question."

Clad now in a lawn nightdress, with her hair flowing freely, she leaned into him. Her gaze intent, her eyes turned from green to light brown—a change that sent a spear of anxiety through his chest. Things went much better for him when Eleanor's eyes were green.

"Are you certain? I think I'm rather ahead in the questioning game."

He spit the words out before he could change his mind. "I'm certain." Then he closed his eyes, knowing what she would ask.

The point of her chin dug into his chest as she propped her chin there. She reached out and smoothed the hair off his forehead. "Tell me about the day your father died."

The memories cut even though he'd had time to gird himself. He might have even flinched once or twice.

"I'm sorry for pressing you. I understand. You needn't answer." Eleanor stroked her thumbs beneath his eyes, brushing away tears that weren't there. They hadn't been there since he was twelve.

"I can do it," he croaked, the words contrary to every thought running through his brain. Thank God his eyes were still closed. "That day—"

"No!" Her fingers slid down his cheeks, pressed on his mouth, trapped the words in his throat. "I was wrong to ask. I meant it when I said I understood. Don't do this for me."

Who else would I do it for?

"I can do it," he insisted again, through her fingers. And as with telling Henry they would have a grand time, Lex began to think he might.

"Why don't I ask you two questions a day?" she suggested,

sliding her fingers down his chin until they dropped onto his chest. "Then I won't feel like an Inquisitor pushing for too much at one time."

How kind yet unfair, for her to take the blame of discomfort. He nodded anyway. "Two questions a day: one in the morning, one in the evening."

"Will you make one other concession? For me."

The soothing aroma of her lavender hair soap drifted up to his nose. "Yes...?"

"Will you open your eyes when you answer?"

Confused, he kept his eyes shut. "I beg your pardon?"

"You seem more willing to talk when you don't have to look at me." There was a distinct tinge of bitterness in her voice. "At night, behind the dark of the bed curtains. Even this afternoon, in the drawing room, you wouldn't look at me when you explained why you married me. But for this... Please, Octavius, will you look at me?"

Opening his eyes, he pushed upright, crowding her, and she lay back on the mattress. Lex loomed over her, his face inches from hers, and he said, "Is this what you wanted?"

She smiled, her mutable eyes shading back to a beguiling green. His heart thumped a little louder, and cradling his cheeks in her hands she said, "I like this very much."

The harshness from a moment before seeped out. She was right; he did find it harder to talk—at least about important matters—when he had to look her in the eye. Feeling her breath upon his face, seeing every emotion she felt in the differing hues shading her eyes: the intensity of it all nearly compelled him to roll away, look away.

Nearly.

He locked his muscles against the compulsion and stared into her eyes. "I accept your terms. Proceed with your question."

She reached her hand across her chest, slipped it into his and squeezed. Armed not just with inquisitiveness, she'd break him down with affection as well.

"Were you there when your father died?"

He took a deep breath and fought the urge to close his eyes. "I was in the house that day, yes."

She leaned close and kissed him on the cheek, then wrapped her arms around him in a soft embrace.

When she pulled back, he asked, “Why did you do that?”

“That was for your twelve-year-old self.”

Lex said nothing. He buried his face in the pillow of hair bunched up around her shoulder, and steadily inhaling the heavenly lavender, he soon drifted off to sleep.



Chapter Nineteen



In the morning, Eleanor awoke. She knew immediately something was wrong.

No, not wrong. Different. Deliciously different.

At some point during the night, she'd draped herself over Octavius. Her cheek lay against his gently rising chest and she'd thrown her leg over his hard thigh. She was naked. He was naked. They'd fallen asleep at last, after another rousing round of coupling.

She smiled at the memories of last night. That sketch Octavius had drawn: He'd made her look like an alluring goddess. She'd been bowled over by his view of her. And the way he'd turned the tables and pressured her to speak of her mother. He'd been more understanding than she ever could have imagined. And the invitation to Astley's—that might have been her downfall right there. She was falling in love with her husband faster than she could think up reasons not to, God help her.

It didn't help that she was exceedingly attracted to him and always had been, but it *was* a relief and a boon that he liked and encouraged her boldness. Calling a truce in their bitter marriage hadn't been such a horrible idea. However, there was one important issue they needed to discuss sooner rather than later.

She lifted her head to see if Octavius was awake. His eyes were open, and as his gaze connected with hers, his lips stretched into a hint of a smile. This was definitely the right way to wake up.

Eleanor inched forward and kissed that smile before it disappeared. Then she laid her palm against his chest. "Good morning. I hate to be so practical first thing in the morning, but I wanted to assure you that I am still taking precautions to...to prevent a pregnancy, as you previously instructed."

She stared at the hard muscle beneath her hand, unsure what

she wanted his reply to be. They had so much work to do on the family they had, adding another child to the mix wouldn't be good for anyone. Still, she couldn't help but imagine how things could be different: Octavius by her side throughout the pregnancy, the two of them discussing names, Henry excited but just a bit jealous too.

"That's for the best," he replied, tone flat, a blank expression on his face. "I'm glad Henry is... We are lucky he is the way he is. But who knows with another child? I just can't, Eleanor."

His answer, while a bit incoherent, concurred with hers, so she could not complain. They had plenty of time to work on building their family after they built a more solid foundation to their marriage. But, unwilling to let this issue chip away at that foundation, Eleanor raised her head and planted a scorching kiss on his lips.

When at last she withdrew, he smoothed her tangled hair off her face and said, "I regret that I finally made plans to meet Mr. Robson at the arsenal again. He's been overseeing the set up the machinery."

"It's just as well. I told Portia I would visit her again today. Perhaps I will take Henry. She's always happy to see him."

Octavius's brow furrowed. "Do you think she'll come home?"

Eleanor lifted her shoulder. "I don't know. She is still so very angry."

With a kiss, Octavius rolled off the bed and slipped out through the drapes. Eleanor heard the sounds of splashing water. "Shall we invite Portia and the Robsons to go to Astley's with us?"

Eleanor stretched. "That's an excellent idea."

"Shall we also invite your parents?"

The wariness in his tone made her temper her response. "That's not an excellent idea."

The curtains parted on her side of the bed. Now wearing his banyan, Octavius lowered himself to the mattress. "Your mother has not treated you well, but you admitted you don't hate her. If you want to give her a second chance, I think Astley's might be the ideal place to make a new start. We'll be in public and we'll have other friends there. If *you* issue the invitation, perhaps your mother might begin to see you in a different light."

"I don't like it when you speak rationally."

He used his thumb to erase the pout from her lips. "I don't like it when you question me. Cheer up, though. You will always be

inquisitive, whereas I doubt I will always—or even often—be rational.”

She couldn't look away from his eyes, so alive they were. This wasn't the old grim Octavius who'd stomped up to the nursery the day she arrived. This man was melting her heart with his touch and his attempts at humor.

He stood abruptly. “I must go before I risk being late.” He strode toward the door to his bedchamber but stopped with his hand on the latch. His voice cracked the slightest bit. “I almost forgot. What is your question this morning?”

She could understand his anxiety about speaking of his father's death, but he'd tensed *before* he remembered their agreement. What had she said to make him nervous?

Espying her wrapper on the floor, she rose and quickly donned it, furiously sorting through all the questions surrounding his father's death. Then she chose one: “Were you in the room when...when the gun went off?”

His eyes lost their focus, and oh, how Eleanor wished she'd never brought up this subject.

“No.”

A mild wave of relief washed through her. A small grace. She nodded, expecting no more.

“I heard the shouting, then the shot,” Octavius continued, his unseeing gaze pointed toward the carpet. “I rushed through the house, searching every room. I found them, my mother and my father, in the sitting room.”

“In the—” She snapped her mouth shut, aware she could ask no more, but the questions raced through her mind anyway. *In the sitting room? Of this house?* No, of course not. He must be speaking of Mayne Castle or one of the other family estates because how could he possibly set foot inside that room if that's where the family tragedy had unfolded?

“I will return in time to meet with Drummond this evening. Until then.”

She looked to him just as he bowed and pulled the door open. He was gone before she could even think of what to say.

This hadn't been a good idea. Instead of reliving the memory once, now Octavius was reliving it twice a day. Determined to address the issue over breakfast, Eleanor moved to the dressing room.

Though she did not dawdle, Eleanor walked into an empty dining room. Bickley informed her the earl had left the house, declining to partake of breakfast. She made quick work of tea and toast, all while convincing herself Octavius had left in a hurry simply to get back to the arsenal, not because he was wary of her. She had seen the spooked look in his eye, though—both last night and this morning when she'd made sheep's eyes at him.

Eleanor sipped the last of her tea, smiling at last. *He'd better get used to it.*

Full of toast and positivity, she tackled the rest of her day. She ordered the carriage, collected Henry, and set off for Grillion's Hotel to visit Justine and Portia. The two alighted in Albemarle Street before a footman escorted them to the Robsons' rooms.

"Good morning." Justine's greeting was more subdued than usual, but when she spied Henry hiding behind Eleanor's skirts she raised her eyebrows and became more effusive. "This must be Lord Corby, the young man Portia has been telling me all about. How do you do, sir?"

Henry stepped forward and took her proffered hand in a light shake. "Good morning, Mrs. Robson. What did my aunt tell you about me?"

"She said that you are quite fond of embroidering handkerchiefs. Oh, and that your favorite dish is cod with boiled turnips."

Henry's face twisted into a perfect imitation of his father's scowl, and Eleanor had to bite back a chuckle. After a moment's thought, he tipped his head up toward Justine. "I believe she must have been speaking of someone else, ma'am."

Justine smiled brightly. "It's entirely possible I am mistaken. While your mother speaks with Lady Portia, why don't you come and enlighten me as to what you *do* like?"

After a reassuring nod from Eleanor, the two of them walked hand in hand to the window seat and arranged themselves comfortably. Eleanor crossed to the door opposite, and after a light tap entered the much smaller sitting parlor where she had met with Portia previously.

Her sister-in-law bent over the writing desk, quill flying across a leaf of paper in a notebook. After a moment, Eleanor's presence registered and the quill stopped. Portia closed the notebook and tucked it away in a drawer before turning.

"How are you, dearest?" Eleanor asked, seating herself in a

nearby chair.

Portia's blue eyes flashed. "I'm not returning to that house."

And so, as Eleanor feared, nothing had changed. She understood Portia's anger at being humiliated by Octavius's behavior. Oh, how she understood. However, she was losing patience with the girl's lack of maturity and sense.

She lifted a brow and added a touch of starch to her tone. "I asked how you are doing. If you are unable to politely carry on the simplest of conversations, perhaps I should suggest your brother enroll you in a school for young ladies. You'll be the oldest student, of course, but—"

Horror flashed across Portia's face, but she quickly composed her features and straightened her spine. "I'm sorry, Eleanor. I'm quite well, thank you."

She looked quite peaked, but Eleanor would let the small lie pass. "Good. I hope your manners toward the Robsons are not something of which to be ashamed."

Portia shook her head. "Of course not. I am grateful for their hospitality and I am *not*—" She turned her palm up and began again. "If I might have your permission, I would like to stay here a while longer."

Eleanor wanted her to come home; she wanted the girl and Octavius to make up. The two of them were family and needed each other, and Eleanor could see it even if they couldn't. But Drummond, if he didn't back out again, was coming this evening, so Portia could not come home just yet anyway.

"You may stay for another day—if you accept Octavius's invitation to join us at Astley's Amphitheatre."

The girl's blue eyes—eyes Eleanor now recognized as a Drummond family trait—brimmed with suspicion at the offer. "Lex wants to go to Astley's?"

"Yes, he suggested we take Henry, and I've come to extend the invitation to the Robsons. I might...I might possibly invite my parents as well." Eleanor hadn't quite convinced herself, but if she wanted Octavius to make amends with his family, she should probably attempt to do the same with hers.

"Speaking of parents, have you heard from my mother?" Portia asked.

Eleanor wasn't thrilled with this evasive tactic, or with the fact that she'd written behind Octavius's back, but she couldn't ignore

the hope in her sister-in-law's eyes. Not that her answer would satisfy Portia. "I'm afraid I have not. I think we must assume she doesn't want to be contacted."

The words were not what Portia wanted to hear, but they were most definitely what Eleanor wanted to believe. Still, seeing Portia sag, she reached over and hugged the girl's shoulders. "I really think the amusements of Astley's will do us all a world of good, dearest."

Before Portia could reply, a young man breezed through the door. His cheerful expression brightened the room as if sunlight had suddenly slipped past the curtains. "Lady Portia, have you—?" He stopped abruptly upon seeing Eleanor, but the smile returned almost instantly. "I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to interrupt."

Portia jumped up, banging her hip against the protruding edge of the writing desk. Her cheeks flushed a becoming pink, but Eleanor didn't think that had anything to do with the injury. "Mr. Robson, may I present my sister-in-law, Lady Lexden?"

The young man stepped nearer Eleanor and made a bow. "My lady, it is a true pleasure to meet you."

Eleanor smiled, but her heart sank. So, this was Andrew Robson. Though very happy to finally meet him, she'd also seen the ardent way Portia's eyes fluttered. For heaven's sakes, did Portia fall into calf love with every young man she met?

Not that Eleanor could blame the girl in this instance. Andrew Robson had much to recommend him. Kitted out in grey pantaloons, a green coat, a gorgeous waistcoat shot through with silver, and shiny Hessians, he did both his tailor and his valet proud. He must be about five and twenty, just a few years younger than Octavius, yet there any similarities ended. The younger Robson's green eyes held a hint of mischief, while his mouth seemed to curve in a perpetual smile that Eleanor had no trouble believing charmed many a young lady.

"I've heard much about you, Mr. Robson, from both my husband and your parents, and I am glad to make your acquaintance at last," Eleanor said.

He quirked a brown eyebrow. "From my parents, I can believe. But Lex talked about me? I can hardly credit that."

She laughed. "Oh, I have ways of getting my husband to speak."

His smile only grew bigger and, somehow, more enchanting. "I do not doubt your charms for a minute, my lady."

Eleanor fought the urge to grab Portia and run. While she could now enjoy this kind of banter for the temporary pleasure it brought and forget it by the end of her visit, in her younger days she would have hung on Andrew Robson's every word, smile, and glance. She feared Portia's immature heart was in much danger from this handsome rogue.

"Did you need something, Mr. Robson?" Portia asked so sweetly Eleanor's ears burned.

The young man snapped a finger. "Indeed I do." He took a step closer to Portia and smiled down at her. "I need your companionship on a stroll through the park."

Eleanor nearly groaned out loud, almost more at the realization of how affected she would have been by such beguiling attention when she was younger than for dread of Portia losing her head over yet another man. And, how alike Portia and Eleanor's younger self were. Portia had been neglected just the same, though under much more dire circumstances. Of course a young girl left on her own in the country would be lonely, would crave the attention of anyone willing to give it, would misbehave in a sad attempt to garner her brother's attention. She and Octavius had much work to do here, including making Portia feel like a part of their family and being truthful with her about everything.

In the meantime, Eleanor could not afford to let Portia be hurt, however unintentionally, by Andrew Robson. Asserting her sisterly authority she said, "Henry has been so longing to see his aunt." When Portia turned suffering eyes her way, she added, "He would love to explore the park if you don't mind taking him with you."

If an incessantly chattering five-year-old didn't dampen the flirtation—at least for the moment—nothing would.

Portia narrowed her eyes, but Andrew Robson spoke first. "A splendid idea! There is much for a boy to see in the Green Park."

Portia altered her expression immediately, smiling and nodding.

"Thank you, Mr. Robson. How kind," Eleanor said. And because she couldn't invite his parents without inviting him, she added, "I hope you will be able to join us for a visit to Astley's Amphitheatre tomorrow. Portia was just contemplating my invitation when you came in."

The two looked at each other expectantly, and Portia was the first to nod. "I think it sounds like fun."

"I do too," Andrew said, grinning from ear to ear.

Eleanor was going to have to have a long talk with Octavius. A year of school wasn't the answer; Portia needed to spend more time within the circle of her family. She needed love, and friendship, and the positive attention of her brother.

With the day's outing arranged and a future evening's entertainment settled, the three moved back to the parlor and found Justine and Henry playing the most rousing game of draughts Eleanor had ever seen. Henry jumped one of Justine's men, gave a raucous cry, and then said, "As forfeit you must sing 'God Save the King'!"

Andrew gave a hearty laugh. "Playing draughts with Mother was never, ever boring. Though I think once or twice she used her eccentric rules to achieve some peace and quiet. I distinctly remember one of the forfeits being to run twice around the garden." He winked at his parent. "We had a large garden."

Justine turned impish eyes on her son, and Eleanor saw where Andrew got his mischievous streak.

In a matter of minutes, the young people were out the door and on their way to the park. Henry's adventures with his father had only heightened his enthusiasm for jaunts in London's greenery, and Eleanor smiled to herself as the door closed behind them and her son's stream of chatter could still be heard. She herself stayed behind with Justine.

The American waved to the sofa. "How are you this morning, my dear?"

Eleanor swept her skirts aside and sat, noting the change in her friend's tone. Justine's cheerful mood seemed to have vanished. "I'm hoping I don't look as wretched as I most likely should."

"I would not wish you to look wretched, but even yesterday you were still so pale and quietly seething—as you had a right to be. Today you look slightly less drained. Have the waters calmed at Lexden House?"

"Remarkably so," Eleanor answered. "Octavius has recovered his faculties, even to a degree beyond what they were." The urge to talk about her husband—his shifting attitude and her newfound love—teetered on the edge of her tongue, but she and Octavius were already supposed to be in love. She wished they'd never started this charade. Considering the friendship they'd shown, the Robsons deserved better.

"Good, good. I had a feeling it was so after he confessed to Mr.

Robson yesterday," Justine said.

Confessed? What had Octavius confessed? And why hadn't he told her? Here she was, looking like a fool once again, expected to lie, to keep up appearances. Eleanor no longer wanted to hide behind prevarications. They had almost destroyed whatever small chance she and Octavius might have at a happy marriage. They had kept Henry from his father. They had almost allowed Portia to pursue an ugly relationship. All lies had to stop.

Justine reached over and clasped her hand. "Lexden admitted he lied about Henry's illness, that he used the pretext to explain your...your separation."

Eleanor couldn't catch her breath. Octavius had put a stop to the lies on his own? At what cost? She had seen how highly he esteemed Mr. Robson, so how would he cope if he lost the respect—and perhaps business acumen—of the American gentleman? She closed her eyes against tears.

Justine squeezed her hand, so she swallowed past the lump in her throat and opened her eyes, saying, "You and your husband have been such remarkable friends, especially upon such short acquaintance. You didn't deserve to be lied to." When she stuttered to a halt, dear Justine had a handkerchief at the ready. Eleanor took it and dabbed at her eyes. "I'm so sorry."

"I can see that you are, but I don't think you have anything to apologize for. The state of your marriage is none of our business, though of course we only want you to be happy."

"You are too kind."

Though, Justine was right: She deserved little of the blame. Eleanor hadn't been complicit in the lie about Henry's health, and she'd only put on an outward face to their marriage as many couples did every day. Octavius was the one who needed to apologize. And he had.

"Oh, Eleanor, you don't know how glad I am to see you smile. I'm sorry for whatever pain you've been through, but the situation does seem to be looking up, doesn't it?" Justine raised her eyebrows, hope and friendship clearly written across her face.

"Yes, yes it is," Eleanor replied with conviction. She and Octavius had started over. They still had mountains to climb and probably a rough sea or two to cross, but even tempered by those cautions she was optimistic, especially after hearing he had taken the step of apologizing to Mr. Robson. She smiled more broadly

now. "Octavius is making plans to visit Astley's Amphitheatre, and I've already invited Portia and your son. We would love to have you and Mr. Robson join us."

"That sounds lovely. I'm sure we would enjoy it very much."

Justine ordered a tea tray, and the two of them chatted until the threesome of youngsters returned, hungry and full of enthusiasm. Eleanor could only sigh when she saw the adoration with which both Portia *and* Henry now viewed Andrew Robson. God help her and Octavius.



Chapter Twenty



Lex rode his horse to the arsenal. He'd invited Robson to ride with him, but the older man declined, intending to take a hackney and meet him there.

Though it might not have been meant as such, Lex took it as a slight, a rebuff for his dishonesty and subterfuge. A deserved one, of course. He'd been so intent on destroying Drummond—his horse shied at his tight grip on the reins—that he'd given no thought to the Robsons. Or Eleanor. He'd been so successful at isolating himself that he gave no thought to what his actions, his *words*, might do to those caught up in his scheme for revenge.

The crush of carriages and carts disappeared as he left London behind, and his horse settled into an easy trot, leaving Lex plenty of time to think. What a legacy his father had left him: a debilitating mental affliction that threatened to overwhelm his life at any moment and forced him to push aside those he might care for so that he couldn't possibly hurt them. All well and good until someone like Eleanor thrust her way into his life. Or someone like Robson slipped in, quiet and steadfast.

Then there was Henry. His son, the future ninth earl. Would Lex leave him the same legacy? From what he'd seen he didn't think so, but who was to say? If not for this need to get Drummond, he might have bequeathed Henry a life of bitterness and denunciation as well. A gaping opportunity to do otherwise yawned before him. But he didn't know how to be a father.

Did I not love you, son? Was I not a good father to you while I lived?

The voice, solemn and low, drifted to Lex's ears on the breeze, and Lex shuddered as the wind died and the air around him and the horse stilled. The answer to his father's question wasn't an easy one.

Some days he'd been a great father, and some days he'd been a terrible one. Lex had never known which man he was going to see.

There was no one Lex had loved more, though. On good days, he and his father would ride around the Mayne Castle grounds, exploring every square inch from the meticulously kept gardens to the farthest tenant cottage. Belatedly, Lex realized his father had been tutoring him in estate management during those outings. They had seemed more like adventures than lessons. His father had even insisted, contrary to his mother's wish, that Lex's entry into Harrow be delayed a few years because surely he was learning all he needed by his father's side. Often they had returned to the house and had tea and cake with little Portia in the nursery, Father entertaining them by reciting Shakespeare in a variety of silly voices.

Lex sighed and surveyed the pale blue sky. *Did you know, Father? Did you know Portia wasn't your daughter?*

His horse had slowed to a mere amble, and a falling leaf fluttered past Lex's face. The voice seemed to speak again and said, *I loved her no less than you. She was mine in my heart.*

Ha. Was that truly what his father thought, or was he just hearing what he wanted to hear for Portia's sake? Because the girl didn't deserve to be loved any less just because Lady Lexden and Robert Drummond were selfish adulterers.

It was like one of Gentleman Jackson's punches to the stomach, the irony of that thought, considering his attitude about Henry over the last six years. He'd utterly failed his sister. He'd cared enough to give her a comfortable home and all the necessities of life. He'd cared enough to hire a capable governess. He'd cared enough to keep her from the alleged immoral influence of his wife. But he hadn't cared enough to love her as a brother should love a sister. Just like he'd failed Henry.

Despite what he'd believed about the boy's parentage, he shouldn't have punished Henry for the sins of others. If what he believed now was true, even Lex's addled father had been a better man in that regard.

The reins fell slack in his hands, and Lex's horse, given his head, veered to the side of the road and lowered his head to the leafy vegetation sprouting there. Lex paid no heed. A noxious ball of rage was forming in his gut that soon overwhelmed his body. He shook in the saddle, his breathing grew louder and more fitful; his head ached. At last he could no longer contain the wrath.

Why, Father? he shouted inside his head. *Why did you leave me? No, not just me. Portia too. If you loved us so much, why in God's name did you leave?*

His horse tensed beneath him but made no sound. All around Lex, silence pulsed. Hot, salty splashes fell onto the saddle as he strained his ears, listening, waiting. Foolishly. There was no answer. Not a single syllable in reply, wind or imagination.

Lex grabbed the reins and urged his horse forward, first into a trot and then into an all-out gallop. They broke through the stagnant air, creating their own wind. His face dried as they raced on and on, but the fury simmered in his heart.

His father had betrayed him, destroying him and his sister in the process. Lex himself had furthered that betrayal day after day after day by deserting Portia and likening Eleanor to his mother. Was the Mayne family truly so doomed? They surely were if he continued to hear voices in his head and respond to them in turn.

He had barely recovered his emotional equilibrium by the time he arrived at the arsenal, covered in a fine layer of dirt and his heart pounding through his chest. For once he wished he'd never hired Robson. He wanted to be alone to stew in his anger, his guilt and his madness. But Lex entered the building to find the ever-efficient American already inspecting the latest arrival: a boring machine.

Lex nodded, muttered "good morning," and moved to the drafting table. Robson returned the greeting and then went back to his inspection. But soon the silence was not just stifling Lex but reminiscent of the echoing deafness of the road. His father was dead, inaccessible despite the voices in his head. And Robson...Robson was still here. And he'd been kind. He hadn't given up on Lex. Yet.

Dropping his pencil, Lex approached the American. "What do you think? Will it suffice?"

"It's a fine piece," Robson said, running his hand along the steel edge. His tone was clipped, businesslike. "I have a suggestion for modification, however."

Taking an unsteady breath, Lex caught the man's eye. "I humbly accept whatever advice you care to give."

One side of Robson's mouth curved up. "Humbly, eh?"

"I'll try. It might take a few attempts. I appear to require as much patience as a puppy in training."

Robson laughed. "Oh come now, give the pup a bit more credit."

The tightness in Lex's shoulders eased. Breathing seemed more effortless too, and he finally smiled. His guilt and anger hadn't disappeared, but simply knowing that Elliot Robson wasn't set against him caused his blackened heart to fade slightly to grey. He waved to the machine and said, "Show me what you mean."

They worked companionably for the next hour, speaking of nothing more meaningful than rifles, bores, and locks. As the day wore on, the arsenal heated up and soon they were forced to remove their coats. Sleeves rolled, Robson continued to modify the mechanical auger. Lex returned to the drafting table, intent on finalizing the layout of the arsenal so they could begin moving equipment in the hopes of starting production.

Robson tinkered without speaking, metal pinging against metal the only sound from his side of the room, and with no idle chatter to distract him Lex's thoughts turned back to his family. Of course, just acknowledging that he *had* a family made his gut burn. For so long he'd convinced himself that he owed them nothing more than a roof over their heads and food on their tables. Giving them anything more would only result in disaster for all concerned.

But wasn't he in the midst of a disaster anyway?

Are family really worth it?

Robson's clanking continued to echo around the mostly empty workshop, but after a moment the man answered. "Absolutely. They will bring you immeasurable joy and love."

Lex sighed. He hadn't realized he'd asked the question aloud.

He heard Robson set the tool down with a soft clink and then the tap of footsteps.

"Did Andrew ever tell you about his sister Hannah?" When Lex shook his head, Robson continued. "I'm not surprised. Even I don't speak of her very often, though I think about her every day. Hannah was our oldest, and she was quite stubborn to say the least. She wanted to go to Philadelphia and become an actress. Not possessing the wisdom I now do"—he flashed Lex a melancholy smile—"I told her she wasn't going to the next village, let alone Philadelphia, and to stop being silly. She insisted she was going anyway. I told her if she disgraced the family in such a manner, she would no longer be welcome in our home. Mrs. Robson nearly left me herself after that edict, especially when Hannah did run away."

Lex had no idea what to say. Robson had said Hannah was the

eldest?

Robson swiped a hand across his mouth. "Two months later, we received word that Hannah died of a putrid fever in Philadelphia. She'd been ill for weeks and could have sent word to us. But I had said..." Breaking off, the American aged visibly.

Nothing Lex could say would have any meaning, but he tried. "I'm sorry. You mustn't blame yourself."

Robson smiled weakly. "But of course I do. It's human nature. Thank you, though, for your kind words. Now, surely you must be wondering why I am telling you this maudlin tale when I just extolled the joys of family life."

"To politely inform me that I'm not the only one with family problems?"

"No, no." Robson shook his head. "As you're all too aware, family will also bring you sorrow and heartbreak. However, here is what I don't think you understand: Yes, you are beholden to your family. You owe them your love and support. But they owe you the same in return. You need the love of your family to get through the sorrow. After Hannah died, when I was feeling so wretched and low that I wanted to crawl into the grave with her, my saving grace was Justine. Though she could have blamed me, as I blamed myself, though she was suffering no less grief than myself, Justine loved me, cried with me, and never wavered in supporting me. Not long after the funeral I realized how much *she* needed me. As did our other children. As I needed—and need—her. I regret Hannah's death every day, but I'm also grateful every day for the love of the others. And so I make sure they know."

Lex wanted to stare out the high window or at the dusty floor, but the American's watery yet piercing gaze held him captive. He'd had no one like Elliot Robson, or Justine, to lean on after the death of his father. His mother left for Italy a week later, ostensibly to grieve. Portia, still so young, had been taken to Somerset by their guardian, and Lex had been enrolled at Harrow. With no one for comfort, he'd turned inward. And he'd become accustomed to the isolation. Craved it. Thought nothing else would make him happy.

But he'd never been *happy*. Not since he lost his father. He'd lost Portia too, and any sense of purpose he might have had. She'd needed him that horrible day, whether she knew it or not, but he'd done to her what had been done to him: shut her out.

Shame clogged his throat. Still, he didn't think things could ever

be truly righted. Portia would never forgive him, and Eleanor... She could never, *should* never, forget how abominable he'd been. Besides, the madness would rear its ugly head again soon, and then where would they be? Right back where the Mayne family always ended: broken and splintered.

He must have made a sound, because Robson's gaze softened and he reached out a hand. Lex instinctively took a step back.

"I... Thank you. I just— It's quite close in here. I need some air." He turned halfway toward the door and then stopped. Fighting against his instinct, he caught Robson's eye. "Would you care to join me?"

Robson, generous as he was, nodded. "A walk along the river sounds like a capital idea."

They walked in silence for several minutes, enjoying the mildness of the day. Then Robson spoke up. "Have you heard anything about my country's reaction to repeal of the Orders in Council?"

"No, I'm afraid it's too soon. The news hasn't reached the United States yet that the British Navy will let American ships go about their business without interference."

"Let's hope that's an end to the nonsense," Robson said with more feeling than Lex thought warranted.

"Sir?"

Robson waved a hand. "Oh, you never know if politicians will react with any sense. We do not plan to return to America before next year, but it would be nice to have the matter settled and our countries on friendly terms again."

"True, but why do I sense concern over something more?"

The man stopped beside the gently flowing river that would power the arsenal, and he said, "My concern is more to do with my return to America. I was told in quite strong terms that my government might look upon me with suspicion if I return to the States while we are engaged in war."

Robson's loyalty would be questioned because he had come to help Lex? It couldn't be borne. "Why did you not tell me this sooner?"

"The matter is at an end. Your government has seen to that."

"But there is no guarantee—"

Robson settled a hand on Lex's shoulder. "There are never any guarantees. I made the choice to come here—and not just for you,

Lex. Justine and I wished to visit our son. Now, let us head back. The work will not do itself.”

They turned back, but Lex was still concerned. He’d come to value Elliot Robson’s friendship and couldn’t bear for the man to suffer any ill consequences because Lex had asked him to come to England.

They managed to finalize the plans for the delivery and installation of the last pieces of equipment in the remaining hours of the day, but it was a struggle with Lex’s mind focused on the upcoming confrontation with Drummond and what Robson had said—not to mention the urgent desire to speak with Eleanor again, to tell her of all that had transpired. He and Robson parted that evening on good terms, boosting Lex’s mood even higher, and by the time he arrived back at Hereford Street he was almost looking forward to facing Drummond.

More than anything, though, he just wanted to see his wife.

Bickley opened the front door and Lex swept inside. “Where is her ladyship?”

The servant just barely hid his surprise. “I believe she’s in the drawing room, my lord.”

Lex hurried up the stairs and found her there penning a note. He paused in the doorway to stare. With her honey-colored hair swept atop her head, and her neck elongated as she bent over the escritoire, she was so damned beautiful, inside and out. How had he unerringly chosen such a wife when he’d been so young and idiotic? The thought made him momentarily unsure of his welcome. Everything with Eleanor was so new, so fragile. How easy would it be for him to say the wrong thing and destroy the tentative connection between them? Too easy, and yet he couldn’t stay away from her. Had no desire to.

He stepped into the room, drawing her attention. Hesitation skittered through her eyes, but he couldn’t blame her after his thoughts a moment ago. He crossed to her and sank down on his haunches beside her chair. “Good evening.”

She scrutinized his face and must not have found it lacking, for she smiled. And that put an end to any control he might have pretended to possess. He reached behind her neck and pulled her head close for a kiss. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders, so he rose to his knees to spare her back. This kiss was less frantic than usual, but the slower, more sensual pace lanced a scorching

heat through his veins nonetheless.

He trailed his lips up the line of her jaw to her ear and whispered, "I think I missed you."

She drew back and stared at him, and Lex's brain finally registered the words that had spilled from his mouth.

"Oh goodness, Octavius." Eleanor's eyes turned soft and delightfully green. She pressed her lips to his. "If you had a charming bone in your body, I might think you were flirting with me."

He took no offense—the thought of trying to be charming made him nauseous—but he was curious. "Since I haven't one, what do you think I'm doing?"

She pushed her fingers through his hair and cupped the back of his head. "I think you're being honest, and the effect is much more powerful."

"If I'm to continue being honest, I'm not certain I want to know what effect I'm having on you."

"I'm not certain you do either," she answered with a wry smile. "How was your day?"

That was the opening he needed. "I realized something." Though, that sounded so innocuous considering the consequences of his past actions.

"I did too." She waved toward him. "But you go first."

Lex paced to the far end of the room, his mouth dry. Then, remembering what Eleanor had said the night before about his refusal to look at her when he spoke of trying subjects, he turned and strode back. "May we sit?"

Eleanor nodded, so he took her hand and led her over to the sofa. When they sank onto the cream damask, he didn't let go. He needed her support even if he deserved her censure. Yet, where did he begin? He opened his cracked lips but nothing came out. Stomach clenched, he shot her a brief glance and tried again.

"Ask me what I did after discovering my father's body."

She inhaled sharply, and he could feel her intense gaze upon him. "What did you do after you found your mother and father in the sitting room?"

"My mother continued screaming. Everyone in the household came running, including the nursery maid, who promptly fainted. I knew Portia had been left alone, and my greatest fear was that she would come downstairs to see what all the fuss was about." He

paused as Eleanor leaned her head against his shoulder, looping one arm beneath his coat and around his waist. His muscles loosened at her touch.

“She was standing in the middle of the nursery, her eyes so big and terrified. My mother would *not* stop wailing, and the sound carried all the way upstairs. When Portia saw me, she ran to me and clung to my legs so tightly that I fell over. We sat on the floor for what seemed like ages. My arms ached from holding on to her. When the screaming stopped, Portia finally relaxed a little. I distracted her by playing games and reading stories, all the while trying to listen to the goings-on downstairs.” He could feel Eleanor looking at him, and Lex drew in a ragged breath at the memory. “I wanted to be down there, to know what was happening with my father, to make my mother be quiet, but everyone had forgotten us. I couldn’t leave my sister; she was too young to even understand what death meant.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and let his head fall forward. “She was three years old, and that was the last time I ever took care of her.”

Eleanor pressed herself against his side, which inexplicably made him feel even worse.

“I’ve neglected Portia terribly. At first I didn’t have much choice, as I was sent off to school and she was sent to the country. But after I gained my majority and guardianship of her, I closed myself off, never giving a thought to whether she needed me or not. I have no more right to claim to be her brother than Drummond.”

Eleanor pinched his arm. “Enough. I’m not going to disagree with you on how you’ve treated Portia, for it is true, but there’s no need to continue berating yourself. Interestingly, our minds were working in the same direction today. I realized the similarities between my younger self and Portia. She just wants to have your attention, to be loved, much as I wanted the same from my mother. With the loss of both her mother and father, you became her parental figure. She’s such a lonely girl, Octavius.”

“I can see that now, but it’s years too late.” The obstinate words came out unbidden, but he had no time to retract them.

“No, it’s not. She needs you more than ever.” His wife swung off the sofa and settled in front of him, hands on his knees. “Octavius. She may not remember that day in the nursery, but I think in her heart she remembers the way you loved and protected her. You are

all she has left.”

“She has you and Henry.” Resisting came so naturally, so habitually.

“You are not going to escape this,” Eleanor said, her voice hard. “It is not too late. She is your sister, and only you can give her the love she deserves. Otherwise she’ll keep trying to find love in some man’s—any man’s—arms.”

“Eleanor!”

Her eyes flashed. “Mr. Semple. William Drummond. Now Andrew Robson.”

Lex fumbled for words, but all his protests died on his lips. Eleanor was right. She was always right. He needed her to push him, though. “She will rebuff me. As she’s done by refusing to come home.”

“Yes, she will. But you will continue to show her you care nonetheless. You can be relentless. I know it for a fact.”

That spark of humor brought the green back into her eyes, and he wanted to pull her onto the sofa, stretch out and stare into their emerald depths forever. Why did she have such faith in him? No one else did, himself included.

Bickley knocked on the door, so Lex helped Eleanor to her feet and then bade the butler enter.

“Dinner is served, my lord, my lady.”

Lex nodded.

After the servant left, he back turned to Eleanor. “Is Portia coming on our outing to Astley’s?”

She nodded. “Yes, she and all three Robsons.”

“I should speak with her beforehand then.”

It was a question disguised as a statement, for he really didn’t know what course of action was best. Luckily, Eleanor understood and said, “Excellent idea. You should also consider telling her about her parentage, especially since we are divulging that information to Drummond after dinner.”

Absolutely not. But he tempered his reply to Eleanor. “Not yet. I would like to re-establish my relationship with her first.”

She looped her arm over his. “Thank goodness I still have time to convince you of the imprudence of that decision. Now, shall we fortify ourselves before meeting with the dreaded Drummond?”



Chapter Twenty-one



After eating dinner and bidding Henry a goodnight, Eleanor freshened up and then hurried to the drawing room. She hoped Octavius could focus on the issue with Portia and not Drummond's lie, that vulgar, insidious, and ungentlemanly untruth. Eleanor's slippered feet pounded down the steps. He'd betrayed their friendship, had Drummond. *No*. She shook her head realizing the truth. There had been no friendship. It was just another lie. She'd been a pawn in Drummond's battle with Octavius.

By the time she reached the drawing room, her heart thumped erratically in her chest. She stopped at the threshold. Octavius and Drummond faced each other inside, though neither was speaking. Octavius's scowl was back, and it was fiercer than ever. Drummond was smirking.

He caught sight of Eleanor. With the tiniest shift, his mouth transformed into the charming, familiar grin she knew, and anger and hurt bubbled up inside her.

Elegant as usual in a black coat and grey pantaloons, he bowed. "Lady Lexden, a *pleasure*, as ever."

"How dare you." Though her whole body was shaking, she strode toward him. Words piled up in her throat so quickly she couldn't get any of them out.

"Eleanor, shall I call the footman?"

Octavius's voice stopped her in her tracks, and she dragged her gaze away from Drummond to look at him. He wasn't smiling, but the rich warmth of his brown eyes reflected the sudden humor in his voice. So she drew a deep breath and said, "No, I think I can manage to restrain myself."

"Good," Octavius replied.

He held out his hand, and she took it. He folded his finger

around hers and drew her to his side and, with her fury abating but not entirely disappearing, she turned to Drummond. A flicker of astonishment crossed his face, after which came a smile, though one more tentative than before.

“Have a seat, Drummond,” Octavius commanded.

Flipping out the tails of his impeccable superfine coat, Drummond lowered himself into the wing chair. “I am ever so grateful for your utterly heartfelt hospitality. To what do I owe the honor?”

“You know nothing of honor,” Eleanor spat without thinking. So much for guarding her tongue. This wasn’t the time for her to unleash her anger. Octavius needed to air his family’s secrets, and that alone would overwhelm both men. Someday, though, she would ring a peal over William Drummond’s head and not regret a moment of it.

“Ah,” Drummond drawled, “so you’ve discovered my little untruth. That only took six years.” He shrugged. “I do apologize, my dear lady, but you were unfortunately caught in the middle.”

“But we were friends!”

She tried to wrench her hand from Octavius’s, but he held fast. Drummond noticed. His eyes widened as his black eyebrows climbed. “You blame me? Your husband is the one who hadn’t the slightest iota of faith in you. What kind of marriage do you have that he so willingly believed me?”

“Enough.” Octavius cut a hand through the air. “I called you here out of the utmost necessity, and I should like to proceed before I or more likely my wife does you great bodily harm.”

“I’m going to pour myself a sherry,” Eleanor said, managing to slip her hand free. She didn’t want to lose contact with Octavius, but she needed to distance herself, to get her emotions under control.

“Why yes, Lady Lexden, I would love a glass of sherry.”

She clenched her jaw and ignored Drummond. This was not the man she knew. Oh, the face was still handsome in its classical Roman way, and his manner as effusive as ever, but... She was ashamed to admit, even to herself, how fooled she’d been by him all those years ago.

Once she reached the drinks cabinet, she inhaled deeply and tried to decide if she could hand Drummond the drink without tossing it all over him. Behind her, Octavius’s voice hardened. “I

must speak with you about Portia.”

Eleanor heard Drummond shift in his chair. “Absolutely lovely girl. So vivacious. Lucky for her she has none of your dourness, Lexden. The highlight of my evening was the time I spent dancing with her. Twice.”

Upon hearing the low growl emitted by Octavius, Eleanor abandoned the sherry and hurried back to the men. Drummond certainly did have a way of jabbing his rapier-sharp words into an opponent’s most vulnerable spot.

“Stay away from Portia,” Octavius ground out, each syllable of the warning sending a shiver up Eleanor’s spine. She put a staying hand on his arm, and to her surprise he covered it with his own. She’d thought he might be too far gone, again, to acknowledge her existence.

Drummond tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair and grinned, clearly enjoying this. “Worried about her virtue, are you? I wonder, is that because of *her* susceptibility to masculine charms, or *my* reputation as a beguiler of young ladies?”

Before she could get a grip on his sleeve, her husband jerked away and reached his enemy in three powerful strides. Bracing his hands on the arms of the chair, Octavius loomed over Drummond. “She is your sister!”

To his credit, Drummond didn’t shrink back, though Octavius’s face was mere inches from his own. Yet his triumphant sneer slipped into a sickened astonishment. When he made to rise, Octavius, thank goodness, stepped back to allow it.

“How long have you kept this from me?”

Octavius slanted him a withering look. “Not nearly as long as I would have liked. I am only telling you now because you acted like a scoundrel and I want to prevent an appalling situation.”

Drummond raised a sleek black eyebrow. “You haven’t informed Portia. If you had, you wouldn’t need to tell me.” A sly grin stole across his features. “I think I shall greatly enjoy informing her of our affinity.”

“No.” Eleanor stepped into the scant space between the two men. “That’s enough.”

“I have every right to know my sister,” Drummond pointed out.

Behind Eleanor, Octavius bristled. “You have no rights. She is and always will be the daughter of the seventh Earl of Lexden. You will never speak to her again.”

Drummond turned and circled the armchair he'd deserted. "I think I will. Over the years, you have paid more attention to stuffing your coffers than you have to her, so why shouldn't I step into the role of proper brother?"

Eleanor turned to Octavius and grasped his hands, which were clenched into tight balls. Drummond's every word was meant to needle and she had no idea how much of what he said about seeking out Portia was sincere. Clearly he enjoyed rousing her husband's ire, though, and the more Octavius reacted, the more Drummond delighted. The man was far more vile than she ever could have imagined.

Smoothing her palms over Octavius's fists and lowered her voice. "Do not let him rile you, for that is what he loves most. I shudder to think how much amusement he's garnered over the years at our expense." Octavius took a breath. His brown gaze focused on her. "Perhaps he'll listen to me if I ask him not to speak to Portia...."

The tension seeped from her husband's fists, and his fingers curled around her hands. "He might, but I am not without a weapon or two myself." Octavius paused and reached out to caress her cheek with the back of his hand. "Thank you. For being here, and for remaining mostly unruffled. Though, I would like nothing better than to see you unleash your fury on him."

The soft smile on his lips nearly had Eleanor melting against him.

Drummond cleared his throat. "Perhaps I could speak with my dearest sibling right now? Oh, but how foolish of me. The latest scandal broth claims she refuses to stay under your roof, Lexden. I can hardly fault her for that after your barbaric display of temper the other evening."

With that mouth, Eleanor was surprised Drummond had made it through school intact.

Octavius turned. As he did, Eleanor looped her arm through his: a small precaution. She believed her husband could handle Drummond without violence, but the temptation would be great.

Jaw clenched, Octavius remained silent for the space of several breaths. Then he spoke, his voice taut but controlled. "If and when I deem the time right, I will inform Portia of her connection to you. If she eventually expresses an interest in meeting with you, I will consider the matter. Until such time, you will have no contact with

my sister.”

Drummond’s blue eyes flashed. “And if I do, you’ll...what? Subdue me with brute force?”

“I’ll ruin you. Utterly and completely.”

Octavius’s response was so swift and menacing that Eleanor shivered. But Drummond, still unperturbed, laughed as if he’d heard the latest *on-dit* about the Prince Regent.

“You won’t laugh when you haven’t a farthing to your name,” Octavius warned. “Your fine clothes, your lavish entertaining, even your house on Grosvenor Street will be gone. What will you have left? ‘Friends’ that you’ve treated as you have Eleanor?”

Scoffing, Drummond turned and paced toward the door as if he were thinking about leaving. Did that mean Octavius hit a nerve? Eleanor watched, searching for the slightest crack in the man’s facade.

When he was a good distance away, Drummond turned back. “My family’s considerable fortune has been secure for generations. We have never needed to augment it with income from trade.”

This time, Octavius laughed. “Think what you will. However, if you so much as breathe near Portia, I will bankrupt you and your family.”

Drummond said nothing. He stared hard at Octavius. Not a muscle moved except a tiny twitch in his cheek, and Eleanor expected him to turn and leave with one final, cutting remark. Instead, he took a step forward. His outrage was understated but present, low and vicious. “Your mother already ruined my family.”

“Your father ruined *mine*,” Octavius spat out.

Drummond cast him a withering look. “Lady Lexden undoubtedly wrecked a number of others as well, given her undiscerning proclivities.”

Octavius’s bark of laughter held no humor. “If you think to insult me through Lady Lexden, you aim off the mark. Do not worry, I give her equal credit for destroying those I love, especially my father. But *your* father...your father claimed to be his good friend all while sneaking into my mother’s bed.”

With each vitriolic response, the men had edged closer. They were now within striking distance. Octavius breathed heavily, and angry slashes of red colored the heretofore unflappable Drummond’s cheeks. The situation was slipping out of control, and Eleanor gasped for the words to calm the storm twisting through

the men.

Drummond hissed. "Because of your mother, my mother hasn't been able to leave her home in seventeen years. She has died a thousand times over from mortification and humiliation."

"At least she's still alive," Octavius rasped.

Despite the legitimate pain here, someone here had to stay rational. Eleanor stepped between the two men and reached out a hand to each. Her left settled on Octavius's chest, her right didn't quite touch Drummond. "Gentlemen. You are carrying on like clans of feuding Scotsmen. You were children at the time, and you cannot hold each other responsible for what your parents did."

She shot Drummond a severe look. "What did your ugly lie accomplish except to ruin one more marriage? Did your mother's pain disappear? Did your father look upon her with love again?" At a small triumphant sound from Octavius, she whipped her head toward him. "What will happen if you destroy the Drummond family? Will your father return from the dead?"

He drew back as if slapped. Eleanor was surprised herself that those words had slipped out, but she didn't regret them. These two needed their heads knocked together. She just wasn't tall enough to do so.

No one said a word for an agonizing minute. Then, unfortunately, it was Drummond who opened his mouth. "If she is my sister, I intend to speak with her. I have no other siblings, and I'm not about to pretend a member of the Drummond family doesn't exist." He lifted his chin. "I will, however, refrain from making the connection public."

Of course he would, for a public revelation would only humiliate his mother further. It would humiliate Portia too. Was there a chance Drummond was acknowledging that as well?

Octavius scowled, a familiar expression Eleanor had not missed in the last week. He advanced on Drummond again, but when he spoke, his tone was somewhat measured. "I have my reasons for not telling Portia the truth at this time. And, despite your assertion otherwise, I most certainly do know her better than you." He raised a finger. "You will not speak to my sister without my permission. If you do, I will ruin your family and call you out as I should have done six years ago. You besmirched my wife's character and made me think the worst of her." Those last words wobbled out, shaky and bursting with emotion. "There is no question of me ever

forgiving you, but you can have a say in whether or not I kill you. I am an *excellent* shot.”

Once again, Drummond looked unruffled, but Eleanor couldn’t admire it. She now realized he used his charm, lethal tongue, and emotional vacuity to deflect strikes at his feelings. Just like Octavius used—had used—his glower, sharp words and stoicism.

Drummond tugged at the lapels of his coat and glared at Octavius. “This isn’t over.”

Eleanor almost stamped her foot in frustration. She understood that the hatred and hurt ran deep, but these two had aired their feelings. They had to see how ineffectual their prejudices were. They had a *sister* in common.

She let a small sigh escape—perhaps in time. Octavius cut his gaze to her, and after a moment his brown eyes softened like sealing wax beneath a flame. He turned back to Drummond and said, “It’s over.”

“Not a chance. Not when you threaten my family.” Then Drummond whirled and stalked out of the room. Eleanor thought it was a weak parting shot.

Before she could turn back, Octavius slipped behind her and pulled her against him. “Thank you.”

She relaxed against his solid length, settling her hands over his at her waist. “Thank *you*. I have to commend your restraint. Mr. Drummond was always so kind to me before. I’ve never seen this side of him. It’s...vile.”

“He knows just what to say.” Octavius rested his cheek against hers. “Eleanor, I’m sorry I ever believed him. I can’t believe I was so foolish.”

She turned in his arms and tipped her head back to look at him. “I will admit to being hurt to begin with. But knowing your history and seeing the two of you together...I can understand why you took his words to heart.” She fingered his cravat. “If you had given me a chance to explain, would you have believed *me* when I denied Drummond’s accusation?”

He shook his head, a tiny movement as if he didn’t want to reply in the negative but had no choice. “I doubt it. But that’s more indicative of what was wrong with me than a mark against your character. You are a saint, Eleanor. I was just blind.”

A more romantic answer would have been lovely, but she accepted that it would have been a lie and nodded in

acknowledgement. She was hesitant to bring up this next bit, but she saw no way around it. “You sound confident that you could ruin his family immediately.”

He lowered his lashes. “I’ve been plotting to do so for six years. Opening the arsenal is the last piece of my plan. Doing so will ruin an investment Drummond’s father made. They are fully tied up in this investment—overcommitted, even. I’m sorry if that appalls you.”

Instinctively Eleanor tried to take a step back, but the arms around her waist were like steel. That reluctance to let go sent a surge of hope through her veins: He wasn’t distancing himself, so why should she? They could have these crucial conversations without losing intimacy.

She relaxed and nestled back into the circle of his arms. “It does. However, I can see how the ‘you’ of the past would devise such a scheme. I was fortunate enough to suffer mere banishment instead of complete ruination.”

Octavius stiffened, scrutinizing her face. Then she felt him relax. “You’re teasing.”

She smiled. “Yes. I know that seems odd, but we have to put the past behind us, Octavius, and concentrate on the present. I would like to ask, though, if you would be willing to completely give up your plan for revenge if Portia were safe.”

He stared past her shoulder for an interminable length of time, and she thought his answer would be an honest “No.” Then he dragged his gaze back to her. “Yes, I would.”

Was that fear in his eyes? She reached up and brushed his cheek with her fingers.

“Really?” Regret buzzed through her for doubting him, but she couldn’t dismiss that fear she’d seen.

“Yes—because I don’t want you or Henry or Portia to be hurt.” A spasm crossed his face. “I thought distancing myself was the best way to prevent doing to my family what my father did.” His chin dropped to his chest. “If Portia didn’t know me, didn’t care about me, she wouldn’t be affected by anything I do. And if I didn’t marry, if I didn’t sire any children...I couldn’t destroy their lives either.”

Oh. I love you, Eleanor realized. *I know it’s absolutely ridiculous that I love you when your thinking is so distorted, so backwards. But I do.*

Somehow she kept the declaration from leaving her tongue, for she didn't think he was ready to hear such sentiments. Maybe he never would be. What she couldn't stop was the need to express that sentiment, so she stretched up on her toes and pressed her lips to his mouth. She kissed him gently, transferring her love from her heart to his. He wasn't perfect. Lord, did she know that. But he had recognized his mistakes and was trying. She'd never dared dream as much.

Eleanor cradled Octavius's cheek and rubbed her thumb across his jawbone. Her naturally brazen side urged her to deepen the kiss, to unleash the heat simmering beneath her skin. This wasn't about lust, though, so she subdued the inclination and feathered her lips across her husband's. Kept things safe.

He held her loosely in his arms, letting her kiss and caress him. Her mouth roamed the planes of his cheeks, the rigid bridge of his nose, the delicate softness of his eyelids. When it came close to his, however, he tried to capture it.

"Eleanor," he sighed. "You're too forgiving."

She laid her cheek against his collarbone, a small smile forming on her lips. "I know. And there's nothing you can do about it."

His arms tightened around her. "I can thank God."

She tipped her head back to look at him. At a minimum, she could convince herself that was affection shining in his eyes. That was enough for now.

Sifting her fingers through his hair, she gave his head a small tug and pulled him into an open-mouthed, tongue-clashing kiss. After a heated moment he drew back, out of breath.

"Bedchamber?"

"I think this room will do nicely," she said with a saucy wink.

His wolfish, non-judgmental grin swelled her heart. And when he crossed to the door, the metallic click of the key in the lock sent her pulse soaring.

What a glorious end to a wretched evening.



Chapter Twenty-two



The next morning, Lex paused outside the Robsons' suite of hotel rooms. Without saying a word, Eleanor entwined her arm with his and leaned against him.

I have faith in you. You can do this. She didn't say the words, but he heard them—appreciated them, even if he probably wouldn't handle Portia as deftly as Eleanor would have. Bartholomew's toes, not even as deftly as anyone else would have. Nonetheless, he owed his sister the effort even if she would not come round in the end. Why should she?

He laid his hand atop Eleanor's briefly before knocking on the door.

A maid admitted them to the drawing room where the Robsons and their son were all seated. Andrew came immediately forward, hand outstretched.

"Lexden! Good to see you again. More to the point, where the devil have you been keeping this lovely wife of yours all these years?"

"Language, Andrew." Justine's murmur came out more as a sigh than a chastisement.

Lex checked himself, realizing Andrew was quizzing him and not making an accusation. He shook the man's hand. "I hope the amusements of Bath proved worthy of your time."

"Amusements are always worth my time," Andrew replied with a cheeky grin. "I hold out hope that tomorrow evening's entertainment will surpass them, however."

"I think you give Astley a little too much credit, but I am glad you can join us nonetheless."

As usual, his friend's easy chatter set Lex at ease, but his chest constricted after all the greetings were exchanged and everyone was

seated. Now, he must act. So he turned to Mrs. Robson.

“Is Lady Portia up and about? I would like to take her for a drive in the park.”

The drive was Eleanor’s idea. She’d thought the curricule would give the siblings privacy, as well as prevent Portia from leaving in high dudgeon. The necessity of trapping his sister in a carriage didn’t exactly fill Lex with high hopes for their meeting.

Mrs. Robson rose. “I’ll just fetch her.”

God bless the woman for not batting an eyelash at the oddity of Lex having to collect his sister from them. The Robsons continually amazed him with their graciousness.

Andrew and his father good-naturedly carried the conversation while they waited. Lex, every nerve pulled taut, sat on the edge of the sofa, contributing nothing more than the occasional nod. After many minutes, far more than it took to grab a bonnet and shawl, Mrs. Robson reappeared with Portia.

She was stormy-eyed. It would be so much less complicated to send her back to Somerset. Complicated, however, was the new state of his life. Lex cared for his sister, if his method of showing it hadn’t been successful over the years. However difficult it might be, now he must try a different tack.

He ventured a smile, hoping it wasn’t too strained. “Good morning, Portia. What do you say to a drive in the park?” It was a risk, posing the offer as a question, but what was the point in attempting to repair the relationship if he was going to continue to order his sister about?

Despite the straw bonnet on her head and India shawl draped over her shoulders, she looked ready to turn around and leave him hanging in front of everyone. Then Andrew, who had risen to pluck a small bun from the breakfast tray, leaned toward his mother and Portia and said in a loud, carrying whisper, “Don’t let his cautious look deceive you, dear girl. The man knows how to handle a dashing pair of cattle. Insist that he show you what they can do.”

“It is a fine day for a drive,” Portia admitted, almost under her breath. Her cheeks flushed pink as she looked at Andrew, and the smile dropped off Lex’s face.

He strode over and pulled the door open. Once Portia swept by, he turned back and gave Andrew a small, grateful nod, and then he looked to Eleanor. Confidence blazed through her hazel eyes, and she made a small shooing motion with her hands. With a deep

breath, he followed after his sister for their tête-à-tête.

Portia said nothing as they descended the hotel stairs. Her silence continued as Lex handed her into the curricule. When he climbed up beside her and took the reins from the tiger, she stared straight ahead, her lips locked tight.

Lex set the vehicle in motion. The weather was indeed fine; the sun shone so brightly he had to pull his hat lower to shade his eyes. A good blustery wind and driving rain would better suit the mood, but alas the sky was cheerfully blue and the breeze lazy and warm.

He maneuvered the horses around the corner onto Piccadilly. "I'm glad you could come today. I probably should have taken you driving before this."

"It's not the fashionable hour," came the stinging reply from between those rigid lips.

"No, it's not," Lex said. God give him the patience He'd blessed Eleanor with. He slowed the horses as the traffic on Piccadilly grew heavier, then glanced at Portia who was looking in the opposite direction. "However, I didn't think you would be at all agreeable to being seen with me during the height of the social hour."

He'd kept his tone light, intent on not sounding accusatory for her feeling as she did. The only response he received, though, was a slight twitch of her shoulder.

God knew he wasn't one to babble, but he couldn't stand the uncomfortable silence. He remarked on the number of carriages on the street, pointed out two dogs scuffling over a scrap on the pavement, commented on the beautiful weather, described the fine attributes of the two horses pulling their curricule, and on and on until at last he swung the vehicle into Hyde Park and down Rotten Row. Portia now probably thought him a lackwit as well as a bad-tempered lout.

Though there were only one or two other carriages on the path, he guided his horses to the side and drew the curricule to a halt, advising the tiger to take a walkabout. With the reins held loosely in his hand, Lex spoke his sister's name. She stared off through the trees.

He reached out and laid his hand upon her shoulder. "Lady Porcupine."

She sucked in a breath and turned. The trembling of her bottom lip nearly undid him. In the face of this young woman he could see the frightened three-year-old he had held in his arms so long ago.

He squeezed her shoulder before letting his hand fall away. "You remember. I wasn't certain you would. You were so little."

"Where's my lady Porcupine?' You used to call that out on your way up to the nursery." She sniffed. "And then you'd fling open the door and I would rush at you. We would both tumble to the floor, and you would pretend to be mortally wounded from all the quills I supposedly injected into you."

He had done. And he'd kept up the play on that horrible day, though his voice had wobbled with emotion as he'd called out on his way up.

"I'm sorry, Portia. For the way I've neglected you. For the humiliation I've caused you. I'm sorry most of all for not being the brother you deserve." The words tripped out more easily than he'd expected. He hoped she didn't think they were glib.

Her gaze fell to her lap, where her fingers twisted around themselves. "Did Eleanor tell you to say that?"

He sighed. "I can't blame you for thinking so, but while she encouraged me, I *wanted* to speak with you. I know I've wronged you, and it's my sincerest wish to make amends."

She pushed her shoulders back and turned those sharp blue eyes on him. "Why won't you let me marry Mr. Semple?"

He sighed again. Of course she was going to be mulish about forgiving him. Was that a Drummond family trait or a Mayne one?

Hellfire. Was his vision of her forever tainted by the knowledge of her paternity? He could not let the Drummond connection make a difference. She was his sister, as she'd always been. And truthfully, she'd probably always been stubborn; he just didn't know it since he'd abandoned her.

"Eleanor already told you that he's in debt, and so he is." Lex paused, uncertain whether to impart the other tidbit of information he'd discovered. Remembering Portia's four-page ode to Semple, he knew how deeply the revelation would cut. If he wanted her to trust him, though, he had to tell her everything. "You're the third heiress he's proposed to in the last six months. You deserve better, Lady Porcupine."

Lex's sister looked away, past his shoulder, her eyes straining hard to focus on...something. Anything, most likely. "I see. Well, that's— That is to say, he— I suppose I shouldn't have..." Then she simply crumpled. Her shoulders and head fell, and if there'd been room in the curricule she probably would have curled into a ball.

Where was Eleanor when they needed her? Lex had no idea what to say, so he just stretched his arm across Portia's shoulders and pulled her back against his side. She stiffened and her breath hitched. Then she huddled into him and sobbed.

They sat like that—her crying and gulping, him silently praying she'd stop—for several long minutes. At one point Lex fished out his handkerchief and pressed it into her hands. Eventually the sobbing grew quieter, replaced by sniffles, and Portia blew her nose into the linen square.

Distraction. "You must have a proper Season, Portia. Next spring, for certain. I know Eleanor would be more than pleased to host a ball in your honor."

His sister pushed away, and the feather on her hat bounced as she released a shuddering sigh. "I don't know. Perhaps I shouldn't be thinking about marriage at all. In any case, the Mayne family no longer has any cache with Society. I would be laughed out of Town."

She had a point. He had dug himself quite the hole. But he'd started clawing his way back out, so he might as well continue. "The uproar I caused will blow out with the wind, if it hasn't already, by next week. There is no need to worry about next spring. And"—he placed his hand over his heart—"I promise not to cause another."

Drummond would be dealt with, and Eleanor...well, Lex had every wish to nourish and not destroy what was growing between them. God-willing, there would be no new reason for a set-to. Not as long as he could keep his affliction hidden. When had it first overcome his father?

Unaware of his thoughts, Portia did not seem confident. She lifted an eyebrow, and tears still clung to her lashes, making her expression especially poignant.

"Surely you can give me a little credit," he begged. "I do care about you. I am your brother after all."

She looked into his eyes, as if assessing his worthiness for the title. Lex had only ever felt less adequate when Henry had looked to him as father.

At last, long last, a tiny smile pulled at his sister's mouth. "I would love to come to London for the Season. Spring seems so far away, though."

Why couldn't he have been blessed with a brother? Any number

of things not involving dancing, gowns, and balls—and suitors—would have sufficed with a young lad. “Eleanor’s ball in honor of the Robsons is fast approaching. You’ll not want for entertainment.” Who knew exactly what kind of entertainment it would be given his current status with the *ton*, but Lex wasn’t about to return to that subject.

Portia nodded, looking slightly more cheerful. “That’s true. Andrew—that is, Mr. Robson will be there. I suppose Mr. Drummond has been scratched from the guest list. He was an amusing dance partner.”

Her tone was laced with innocence, but Lex didn’t miss the hint of criticism that lurked in her eyes for his actions at the ball. Finally able to see a glimmer of light in the tunnel toward righting his relationship with his sister, he couldn’t bring himself to tell Portia about her parentage. He’d upset her enough for one day by explaining Semple’s past. Too, he didn’t want to share her affection with Drummond, a man who could easily contort himself into the exact kind of brother Portia thought she wanted. The sordid truth would best be told another day, when Eleanor could be present to support Portia. And Lex.

So, he prevaricated. “There is no love lost between me and Mr. Drummond. I think all of Society is aware of that now. We have, however, discussed the matter like the gentlemen we are and agreed to keep our distance from each other. Still, I can assure you that there will be at least a score of ‘amusing dance partners’ at the ball. You will not lack for admirers, Portia.”

And you will undoubtedly fall in love with each and every one.

Her spine stiffened at the brittleness that crept in during his speech, but, perhaps sensing that it was directed more at Drummond than herself, Portia smiled when he complimented her. “Will you promise me something else, Lex?”

He couldn’t help it; he grinned when she used his shortened name. “If I can.”

“Promise me I won’t be sent back to Somerset to live by myself.”

He really had been an ogre. But that was over. He reached out and squeezed her hand. “I promise, Lady Porcupine.”

Her eyes brightened, and she sat back. “Now, show me what these cattle can do!”

Lex tightened his grip on the reins and, ever grateful to *do* instead of *say* something, he set the horses to showing off their

speed and finesse. And by the time he pulled the pair up again at the other end of Rotten Row, Portia was clutching her bonnet and smiling like Henry after the spinning game.

“Impressive,” she exclaimed. “I never would have guessed you to be so daring.”

“I have my moments. Just ask Henry. Now...” He glanced over at her, knowing he needed to strike while her good humor persisted. “Portia, will you come home?”

Her smile faded. Lex waited, holding his breath, unsure how he would proceed if she refused, but at long last she nodded. “May I wait to do so until after we visit Astley’s tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course. Absolutely.” The words rushed out with his breath. Finally feeling on firmer ground, he ventured, “Shall we put the cattle to the test one more time?”

They were off and flying before her answering grin had fully formed.



Chapter Twenty-three



“**A**re there really horses *inside*?” Henry asked. He bounced up and down on the carriage squab, his bottom touching the velvet seat for no longer than a second, and Lex looped his arm around the boy’s shoulders, using his hand to weigh the child down.

“There are indeed horses inside the amphitheatre. As well as acrobats, jugglers, and dancing dogs. I’m sure I’ve never seen the like.”

Across the vehicle, Eleanor reclined against her seat, a satisfied smile lighting up her face. She had not invited her parents to accompany them this evening, though she had capitulated and issued a formal invitation to the ball. It seemed for the best, at least to his mind. She could relax in their absence tonight knowing she’d made an effort to connect with them in the near future.

As they headed over the Westminster Bridge to Astley’s, Lex wasn’t certain who was more excited—Henry, in anticipation of seeing such an odd assortment of characters, or Eleanor, delighting in having them all together. She’d been smiling all day, every time she looked at Henry or Lex, even sometimes when she wasn’t looking at them. Those expectations sat in Lex’s pocket like a rock: always present, a little heavy. He’d vowed to himself to be on his best behavior.

At last the carriage rolled to a stop in front of the unprepossessing building on Surrey Road. Henry leapt up, his various limbs wiggling and jiggling in a flurry of activity. “Can we go in now? Are the Robsons here?”

Lex stepped down through the carriage door and reached up to assist Eleanor. He said, “We’d better hope the Robsons are here already. I don’t think he can wait a moment longer.”

She grinned at him, completely oblivious to—or perhaps

enjoying—his grumbling. “You’ve made his day.”

And yours.

She hadn’t said so out loud and, truthfully, he didn’t want her to. Just seeing her happy and relaxed made his chest swell... and his stomach churn at the thought of doing or saying something unfortunate to make her smile disappear. Such an occurrence was inevitable, without doubt, but the longer he could refrain, the longer he could bask in Eleanor’s good graces. A very good place to be, he was discovering.

Henry grasped the sides of the carriage door and launched himself down to the pavement, landing solidly on his feet. With Eleanor’s arm around his, Lex grasped his son’s hand. “Colonel, do you spy our party yet?”

Consternation filled Henry’s face. He stared into a sea of breeches and skirts which filled his line of vision. With a chuckle, Lex took pity on the boy and hoisted him up.

“There they are!”

“You make an excellent scout.”

The three of them made their way over to the Robsons and Portia. Greetings were exuberant, even from Lex’s sister. Her good mood was no doubt due to Andrew’s affable manner, and Lex vowed to watch the two of them closely—but since she wasn’t dwelling on her aborted plans with Mr. Semple, he was thankful for his friend’s charms.

He paid the group’s admission fees and ushered them inside the amphitheatre. Henry, once again in Lex’s arms so he wouldn’t get lost in the crowd, was struck speechless at last. The boy’s eyes widened with delight at the sight of the huge arena and stage, not to mention the enormous chandelier hanging above it all.

They ascended the stairs and found the box they were to occupy. Henry wriggled down and raced to peer over the edge. “Mama, come and look!”

Eleanor and Justine gave over their attention to the boy, while Portia and Andrew settled in their chairs, eyes seemingly only for each other. Lex bit back a sigh.

“Lady Portia informs me she intends to return home with you at the end of the evening,” Robson said over the cacophony of the crowds below.

“She does. I thank you for the hospitality you’ve shown her.”

Robson clasped his hands behind his back. “It appears you were

successful in speaking with her yesterday. I wonder if you might now wish to try your luck with Andrew.”

What? Was Robson, too, worried about the increasing intimacy between his son and Lex’s sister? “In regards to what, may I ask?”

“Justine and I would like Andrew to return to America with us when we go next spring. Despite coming here four years ago to study at the university in Edinburgh, he rarely appears to even set foot in Scotland, let alone study there.” Robson shook his head. “I don’t want to issue an ultimatum, for I’ve seen how poorly that can turn out, but we are disappointed in his lack of commitment to...well, to anything besides traveling the countryside and doing as little as possible.”

Andrew had been a wastrel, though a delightful and amusing wastrel, for as long as Lex had known him. He’d spent the odd month or two in Edinburgh, but not nearly enough time to become the doctor he professed to want to be. That aside, he was the only friend Lex had. It was difficult enough to think of losing Mr. and Mrs. Robson’s company, no matter how far in the future their departure. Losing Andrew’s...

“Is there a position waiting for him in Baltimore?”

Robson lifted a shoulder. “He could have any number of positions. My brother owns a bank, I’ve offered to speak to my old colleagues at the Harpers Ferry Arsenal, a family friend is always in need of clerks at his shipping office... The possibilities are endless, but the boy has no focus. Never has. I should have sent him off to the navy at the earliest opportunity.” The man’s mouth lifted at the corner. “Couldn’t bear to part with the rascal, though. I suppose I created the monster.”

Lex looked at Robson and then shifted his gaze to Henry, who was chattering in Eleanor’s ear. “If you ruined your son by loving him too much and I ruined Portia by loving her too little, I don’t think anyone will ever be successful at bringing up a child.”

His son suddenly raced over and grabbed his hand. “Sir, sir! The dogs are dancing. Do come and look!”

Seeing to the boy’s entertainment was easy. Guiding him through life with a deft hand of just the right amount of affection, discipline, praise, advice... How could one do it?

“We all make mistakes,” Robson said in a low voice. “It’s the learning from them and the asking for forgiveness that gives us a chance, I suppose. Oh, and a heaping dose of love doesn’t hurt,

especially if your children *know* you love them.” He patted Lex on the shoulder. “Don’t be afraid to fail, lad. As I said before, we’re all in this together.”

Henry tugged on Lex’s arm, and with a rueful smile at Robson he allowed his son to pull him over to the box wall. Soon enough, he too was caught up in the antics of the animals and performers below. Even Portia was drawn out of her seat by the ropewalkers.

She stood beside him, clapping and cheering, her cheeks pink. “This was a splendid idea.”

“I’m glad you are enjoying the show. And the company,” he added, keeping his eyes trained on the man crossing the rope high above.

“Mr. Andrew Robson is a pleasant companion.”

He glanced at her, wondering if she would take the meaning of his warning. “I have found the same myself—though I have not found his companionship to be consistent.”

“Well, he does like to travel. I think there is something to be said for not spending the whole of one’s life in one place.”

After keeping her shut away on the estate in Somerset, he probably deserved that. And, hoping against hope that he didn’t regret it later, he offered, “If you would like to see more of our country, we could plan a trip for the autumn.”

Portia whipped her head around. “Truly?”

“Why not? Henry would love to explore old abbey ruins and neglected castles, and I’m sure you and Eleanor would enjoy the scenery at that time of year.” And himself? He’d spent every autumn for the past six years traveling the lesser roads of England, pretending to visit his wife in the eyes of Society. It did not escape him that he was now proposing to tour the country with her. And his son. And his sister.

And the idea didn’t entirely horrify him.

“Oh Lex, can we go to the Lake District?” Portia seemed to have forgotten about the ropewalkers. “And Bath? Andrew would be the perfect guide to show us around Bath. Scotland!” She drew her hands together. “Please say we can go to Scotland.”

“Who is going to Scotland?” Eleanor asked as she slipped her arm through Lex’s.

“No one at present. Portia wishes to do a bit of traveling, and her itinerary is extensive.” Lex inclined his head toward his sister. “I think you’ll have to make a list of all the places you want to go, and

then we may have to narrow your choices down—at least for this year.” He settled his hand over Eleanor’s. “You and Henry would like to travel, wouldn’t you?”

Her smile was wide and oh-so-gratifying. “Yes, indeed. Though I think it might be best to keep him uninformed of our plans until our departure is near. His enthusiasm can be overwhelming.”

“I think it’s magnificent,” Lex said. When both his sister and wife gaped, he shrugged, though he felt anything but nonchalant. “I admire his exuberance. In fact, I’m envious of him and the outlook he has on life. I would love to find the joy in things that he does.”

Portia gave him an odd look, but then the crowd sent up a great roar and all three of them turned back to the arena and stage where a fearless rider stood juggling balls while standing on the backs of two horses. His sister’s face lit up, and she moved forward for a better view—near Andrew.

Eleanor laughed at the spectacle below and then took Lex’s hand. Guiding him to the shadowy corner of the box, there she lifted a hand to his cheek. “I too hope Henry never loses his enthusiasm. Perhaps we can try to follow his example.”

Lex put his fist to his chest. “So you think there’s a chance to revive this blackened heart of mine?”

Her tender smile did just that. “Absolutely. You should know by now that I’ll never give up on you.”

He dipped his head and kissed her, unable to resist. It was just once, but he did linger a little. “Why, Eleanor?”

She blinked up at him. His heart beat triple-time while waiting for the answer, but at last she braced herself on his arm, stretched onto her toes, and put her lips to his ear to give the answer they’d been dancing around for the past few days. “Because I love you.”

She rocked back on her heels, hands clasped in front of her, looking innocent, as if she hadn’t just snatched away his breath, leaving his vision blurred and his head as light as a cloud. Somehow he opened his mouth anyway. “You—”

Fingers pressed to his lips silenced him. “Don’t speak. Just let the words settle in.”

She slipped away, joining the others to watch the spectacle below. Lex steadied himself on the chair in front of him before stepping around and sinking onto it, but his head still buzzed with the drone of a thousand angry bees and the repetition of Eleanor’s matter-of-fact “I love you.” He concentrated on breathing, and soon

the words drowned out the bees. The noisy insects were no match for Eleanor. Apparently nothing and no one was.

He couldn't fathom *why* she would love him, but if he was honest, he could no longer deny the hints had been there—in her eyes, in her touch, in her words. He'd simply pretended ignorance, afraid of what acknowledging her new feelings might do to him. So far, they'd knocked him a bit senseless. Hindered his breathing and made his chest burn. But not in a painful way. More in an oh-God-how-long-before-I-do-something-lack-witted-and-wreck-this way. How long before his father's madness made him repeat history and destroy everything?

Yet... *Don't be afraid to fail, lad.*

Henry's laugh drew his eye to where Portia ruffled the boy's hair. Eleanor leaned toward Mrs. Robson nearby, sharing an observation, sharing a smile. Mr. Robson, hand on Andrew's shoulder, pointed out something in the ring below. And Lex gave up. There was nothing he could do if his father's madness crept up on him. But until it engulfed him completely, why wasn't he taking every last opportunity to love the family he had? Such a simple idea, and yet he'd never before had the confidence to act on it.

Lex pushed himself upright. A free-forming grin—the first that he could recall in a long while—spread across his face. He wanted to care for them and be loved by them. Especially by Eleanor. With her love to bolster him, he could embrace life, family and friends. No, not could. *Would.* His wife loved him. She had faith in him. Could one become inebriated on emotion? Because he felt foxed as the devil, and it was glorious.

He swooped forward and caught Henry up in his arms, giving the boy a quick squeeze before positioning him with the best view of the mock military engagement, complete with cavalry, being fought onstage below. Eleanor's face tipped up and her eyes began to dance. Lex slipped his free hand to her waist and pulled her close, brushing his lips across her hairline, catching a waft of her lavender soap, and though he was enjoying this outing to an unprecedented degree, he suddenly couldn't wait to be secluded behind bed curtains with her.

With much clapping and laughter, not to mention a few indiscreet cheers from Henry, their group finished watching the performance. When it was time to leave, as the ladies gathered their shawls and his son talked Andrew into a stupor, Lex approached

Robson.

"I'll speak to Andrew if you still wish it."

The American nodded. "I do, but I don't expect you to work a miracle, Lex. I'm hoping my son simply needs a friendly ear and perhaps a slight prod to start him thinking about his future—whether it lies here or in Baltimore."

"Consider it done." Lex cast a knowing glance toward Portia. "I hope you don't mind if I utter a caution as well. My sister is in need of much attention these days, but not, I think, from potential suitors."

Robson's silver eyebrows rose. "I am honored that you would number Andrew among Lady Portia's prospects, but I agree entirely that neither of them is ready for courtship, let alone marriage."

"Indeed," Lex said. "And now, if you will excuse me, I should like to escort my wife on our way out."

"I should like to do the same with my own," Robson said with a smile.

Lex snatched Eleanor's shawl from the back of a chair and slipped it around her shoulders. Without even turning, in one fluid motion she made a final remark to Mrs. Robson then took his proffered arm, as if she knew it would be there. As if they had done this a hundred times.

They would. They would dance this mundane dance a hundred times and he would cherish each. He would cherish *her* for being the relentless, loving woman she was.

"Did you enjoy the performance?" she asked.

"What I saw, yes. More than that, though, I enjoyed the conversation."

"Who is this imposter who walks beside me?" Eleanor teased as they exited the box behind the Robsons and Henry, who was in the firm hold of Portia. The crowd in the passage pressed in around them.

"I learned much this evening, though my education had nothing to do with horses, jugglers, or ropewalkers. Eleanor, I will..."

Lex trailed off. Espying Mr. and Mrs. Ardmere at the same time, both he and Eleanor had nodded at the couple, who pointedly looked away, refusing to acknowledge them. *Hell's teeth*.

Eleanor rubbed his upper arm, which had hardened into a ball of tension, and he forced himself to look at her. Lines furrowed her forehead, but her words were kind. "Do not concern yourself with

them, Octavius. We have no need of their goodwill.”

“I am not concerned for myself. *You* did nothing to deserve their censure.”

Their descent was slow, careful not to tread on those in front of them on the steps to the ground level. But Eleanor took a moment and caught Lex’s eye. “Truly, I do not care. I would love nothing better than to return to Mayne Castle and live the quiet, country life. With you.”

He couldn’t remove to Essex at the moment, not with all the work to be done at the arsenal and the Robsons in London at his request. He still wanted to make a go of securing the government contract, though now he’d have to ensure the Drummonds ended up no worse off for it. “Perhaps this winter we might return to Mayne Castle...”

As he guided her through the final exit and onto the pavement to wait for their carriages, the crisp night air sent a shiver racing across his skin. Or perhaps it was the thought of making so many plans—autumn travel, winter in Essex—with his family. This was a life totally unknown to him, and the pressure to succeed at it was almost unbearable. So he pushed it aside and focused on the fact that he was heading back to Lexden House with Eleanor, Henry *and* Portia. All of them were together and on speaking terms. He couldn’t ask for more at the moment.



Chapter Twenty-four



After that wonderful evening at Astley's, Eleanor awoke the next three mornings exactly where she wanted to be—in her husband's arms. On this gloomy day, she noted a distinctly non-gloomy shape beneath the bed linens at the juncture of his thighs and her own juncture responded. She could easily slide onto that rigid length, wake him with a few kisses...

But there was something else she longed for, something she hadn't yet broached. Despite Octavius's seeming approval of her wild ways, she hadn't quite spoken her secret desire to him yet. She might yet wait to see if he would do it on his own, without a suggestion from her, but even now, just thinking about it, her sex grew hotter and wetter. If he wasn't interested in this sort of activity, she would let the matter lie.

Or would try to.

Carefully, she slid up the length of his body until she could kiss his sleep-softened lips. "Octavius?"

"Mmmm?"

He shifted his thigh against her mound, sending a thrill of pleasure through her. She moaned, and he dipped his chin to capture her mouth in another kiss. Meanwhile, his hand smoothed down her back to press against her bottom.

She had to ask—before the passion went to her head and she was no longer capable of speech. Octavius made a disappointed sound when she pulled back, but she kept her course, lifting her lips to his ear and whispering her request.

Splayed half over his body, she could have sworn she felt the instant blast of heat her words sent through him, and he opened his mouth twice before words came out. "I've never done that."

"Oh." Really, though, should she be disappointed? Surely she

should feel the opposite that he'd never pleased another woman that way.

"Eleanor, if I haven't done it with you, I haven't done it."

Her ears must be stuffed with cotton. Surely she misunderstood. "Before we married, you hadn't ever lain with another woman?"

He shook his head.

"And you've admitted you haven't since."

"That is correct."

She rubbed a thumb across his lower lip, flabbergasted. "It's true. You are the Monk. Tell me why, Octavius."

"Given my parents' marriage, I...I abhor infidelity. Even though our marriage had fallen apart, I couldn't ever repeat my mother's unfaithfulness." He looked at her. "I regret that my faithfulness had little to do with you and more to do with my past."

"I understand." She did. And Eleanor's regret now was that the conversation was so far off course from her original intent—

Octavius pushed his body against hers, pressing her back onto the mattress. "I'm more than willing to try your suggestion, though I cannot guarantee success."

Her smile was wide and silly, and she didn't care; three weeks ago she never could have imagined her husband would be game to fulfill this carnal wish. She rubbed her hand up his neck, letting her fingers curl into his hair. "I'll return the favor sometime. Or any another desire you might have."

His eyes darkened with lust, and every inch of Eleanor's skin tingled with want.

Starting with her mouth, he began kissing his way down her body. Along her neck, across her chest, a brief suckle on each nipple that whet her appetite for what was to come. His hands gripped her hips as his lips trailed down her stomach to the place she'd never been kissed. She was nearly intoxicated with need by the time he arrived.

He parted her with his fingers and flicked his tongue into her most intimate place. Intense pleasure surged through her veins, and she clutched the bedsheets. Still, an irrational fear had her lifting her head to see if he was repulsed by what she'd asked him to do. He looked up, then, his face aflame with heat and desire, and while their gazes were locked he moved his mouth over her again, every spot he kissed and licked feeling the full force of his passion.

She could no longer hold her head up. Every sensation—the

scrape of his morning beard against her flesh, the rasp of his tongue over her bud, the hot caress of his breath—was heightened beyond all she'd ever dreamed. Octavius had established a rhythm to his madness, and she writhed against the sheets, unable to stop the moans issuing from her throat. She was near the brink, so close, wallowing in the ecstasy of his laving tongue that her hips bucked off the mattress.

“Octavius, please. Oh, please!”

He reached a hand out to anchor her hips. And then...and then he slipped a finger inside her, gliding it back and forth, all while his mouth continued its assault. She was done for. A glorious ecstasy wracked her body until at last she could only sprawl senselessly across the sheets.

Octavius kissed her thighs. “I don’t think that was my best effort. I may need more practice later this evening.”

She let out a shuddering sigh. “If you insist.”

Though feeling too languid by far, she lifted her head a fraction. “Shall I...do the same for you?”

“Not right now,” he replied, his voice thick. He stretched his broad frame out beside her and turned her gently on her side, facing away from him. “Right now, I want to do this.” And with a firm hand on her hip, he slid his member between the cheeks of her bottom and entered her.

“Ahh...”

Given the strength of her climax, Eleanor hadn’t thought she’d feel desire again for a good number of hours, but the moment his hardness filled her up, her senses awakened, ready again to sing. Octavius thrust against her bottom in that same pleasure-building rhythm he’d perfected, and he tucked his face up against her neck, his kisses punctuated by erotic groans that reverberated through her. And when his strokes reached a feverish pitch and his seed spilled inside her, her own pleasure crested and swept over her.

“My God, Eleanor,” he mumbled against her neck as his whole body collapsed against her. He’d said such a thing many times after they’d made love, and she’d always taken his tone to be disgust, but now she heard nothing but wonder—and, dare she think it, affection? Her opinion of herself must have always distorted his tone.

“This was always good between us,” he was saying, “but now...now it’s magnificent.”

He withdrew from inside her, and she turned to kiss him. The faint scent of her body lingered on his lips, and she couldn't hold back a smile. She'd asked, and he'd done *that* for her.

Nuzzling his neck, she whispered, "I love you. You are generous above all things, contrite when you need to be, and amusing if you try."

He buried his face in her hair, holding her tight. "You are the best thing that ever happened to me, Eleanor."



"YOU HAVEN'T STOPPED smiling since we returned from Astley's," Portia said, a frown marring her features. "It's unnerving."

Eleanor picked up her spoon and swirled it around her teacup. "I have so many things to smile about—your return, the peace that has descended upon this house, the ball we are to host this evening." Also, the love she had for her husband. The love she had expressed and he had faced, accepted even, with only the briefest of hesitations. Not to mention awaking in the morning to his diligent pursuit of knowledge in the marital acts. What *wasn't* there to smile about? Eleanor had floated around the house the last three and a half days on a cloud of joy. It didn't matter that he hadn't claimed to love her too. He needed time, and she didn't mind waiting. His actions spoke quite loudly, as did the words he had uttered: *You are the best thing that ever happened to me.*

"It's raining," Portia observed. "What a miserable day for a ball. Even if we had a sterling reputation, not many will likely attend."

Eleanor reached over and tugged on her hand even as the rain splashed more violently against the window. "We are hosting a ball, sister dear. A ball! Could we ever have imagined this weeks ago, with you isolated in Somerset and me banished to Essex? I don't care if rains, hails, or snows, we'll be inside dancing, laughing, and enjoying our friends' company. I don't care if only few guests show up. They will be our most cherished guests for having had the fortitude to weather the elements and Society's censure."

The speech did nothing to lift Portia's spirits. She sank back in her chair, pulling out of Eleanor's clasp, and Eleanor winced. Portia unexcited about a ball was cause for concern.

She went to her sister-in-law and stroked a hand down her cheek. "What's wrong, dearest?"

"I want to be excited, I do. I just have a bad feeling about

tonight.” A tear slipped down her cheek, which Eleanor swiped away with her finger. “What if no one asks me to dance? What if I do something improper? It’s not as if I’ve been raised in Society. And, what if Lex explodes again? I know he promised not to, and I know you are thrilled with”—she flapped a hand in the air—“whatever is going on between the two of you, but I can’t help but recall that horrid night.”

“Oh, Portia.” Eleanor drew the girl up into her arms. “I cannot say your concerns aren’t valid. However, if you start the night off miserable, you’ll likely end it that way. Wouldn’t it be better to give yourself a chance?”

“You make everything sound so simple.”

Eleanor pulled back and framed Portia’s face between her hands. “Believe me, I know that everything isn’t simple, but I’ve learned that focusing on the positive aspects of life makes me happier. When Octavius sent me away, I didn’t wallow in the ostracization. I embraced the freedom. And now things are even better. Yes, his accusation that I cuckolded him cut me deeply, but he apologized. What do I have to gain by withholding my forgiveness? He’s trying, Portia, and I hope you can give him a chance to prove himself.” She tapped the girl’s nose. “And as for your inexperience with Society, you did quite well the other night at your first affair, so I have no doubt you’ll shine tonight as well.”

“As I said, your cheerfulness is annoying.” But the girl’s words were accompanied by a reluctant smile. “Annoying but infectious.”

Eleanor breathed a little easier. She did so want Portia to enjoy herself this evening. She wanted *all* of them, as a family, to have a good time. They deserved it.

“Let’s see how things are going in the kitchens, and then we’ll pick out some ribbons for your hair. Oh, and we’d best spend some time with Henry, as he is going to be very cross when he realizes he cannot attend the ball.”

Portia gave her a quick hug. “Thank you, Eleanor.”

They were sprawled on the rug in the nursery, Henry having pleadingly convinced them to stage yet another battle, when a roaring “Noooo!” echoed up the stairs. All three looked up at each other, Henry in concern and Portia in alarm. As for Eleanor, her chest ached at the clear anguish in the tone.

She caught Portia’s eye and pushed to her feet. “I’ll investigate. You two carry on with the skirmish.”

Hurrying down the steps, she nearly tripped twice. All had gone silent, so she wasn't certain where to head, but she decided Octavius's study was the obvious choice; it had been his voice. She tapped on the closed door. No reply was forthcoming, though a loud thump reverberated through the thick oak that she took as a sign to enter.

Octavius was there. He slumped over his desk, head in hands, a piece of paper crushed between his fingers. He didn't seem to notice her.

She slipped around the desk and laid a hand on his shoulder. Not a muscle moved.

"Unfathomable. What am I to do?"

Octavius was naturally abrasive, stern, dictatorial, but never morose. Henry and Portia were upstairs, safe. Eleanor was well, too. The only other people her husband cared about were the Robsons.

The twinge of pain that had settled in her breast expanded, nearly rendering her speechless. She forced words to form. "What has happened? Is Mr. Robson unwell?"

Octavius gripped his head tighter but didn't respond. Eleanor rubbed his back with one hand and plucked the paper from between his fingers with the other. She squinted to read the crinkled note, glancing first at the signature to learn it was from Mr. Robson himself.

Dear Lex,

I regret to inform you that the Alien Office has requested I leave England immediately. If you have not yet heard, my country has declared war on yours despite the repeal of the Orders in Council, and my history as an arms manufacturer has made my presence here suspect. Or so I am told. At first light, Mrs. Robson and I are to be escorted onto a ship bound for Canada, and from there we will be sent back to Baltimore.

We have graciously been allowed leave to attend your ball this evening, but I wanted to give you and Eleanor advanced warning so we do not cause a disruption to your gathering. We look forward to seeing you and yours one last time.

Yours,

Elliot Robson

Eleanor bent down and kissed his temple. Turning, he slipped his arms around her waist and drew her onto his lap. She held him tight and whispered, "Oh, Octavius, I am so sorry."

"I can't go on without him," he mumbled into her neck. "The arsenal. I need his experience and his expertise. I can't lose him."

He wasn't speaking of his factory, though. She'd seen how close the two men had become. How often Octavius turned to Robson for advice. He'd finally found a true father, someone he could rely on, and now Robson must go.

She pulled back and framed his face with her hands. "He won't be gone forever." *Unlike your father.* "This war can't last forever...and I am certain they will stay in touch."

Octavius shook his head. "His government warned him not to come here when tensions were so high. Who knows what the consequences of that threat might be?" He jumped up, deftly setting her on her feet. "I must speak to Lord Palmerston. Or possibly the Foreign Secretary. The government doesn't realize how much the future of British arms manufacturing relies on Elliot Robson, and they do not know the circumstances they are sending him back to."

"Do you think you can have any influence?"

Octavius lifted his face to the ceiling and sighed. When he looked at her again, his eyes were suspiciously bright. "I must fight for him, Eleanor."

"Yes, you must." He must fight for the entire family. She stretched up on her tiptoes and kissed him. "Good luck."

Before she could back away, he snaked an arm around her waist. "Thank you, Eleanor. I'll be back before the ball begins. I promise. I won't let you and Portia down." He stroked her cheek. "Will you write to Mr. Robson and inform him of what I'm doing?"

She gave him a reassuring smile. "Of course. Now, go. Be persuasive."



LEX HURRIED OUT OF the house and headed toward Oxford Street. Hiring a hackney would get him to Whitehall much faster than ordering his carriage. Still, the streets were clogged with vehicles of all sorts and it seemed to take a lifetime before he was climbing the Treasury Building steps.

Inside, he gave his name and inquired if Lord Palmerston, the Secretary at War, or Lord Castlereagh, the new Foreign Secretary, would see him. He would prefer to speak with Palmerston, with whom he'd had an ongoing correspondence about arming the nation's soldiers, however Castlereagh was in charge of the Alien

Office from whom Robson had received his letter of expulsion.

After pacing the anteroom for another quarter of an hour, he was finally escorted in to meet Castlereagh. Though older than Lex, the secretary's sandy hair and bright eyes gave him a youthful appearance.

He nodded. "Lexden. It's good to meet you, though perhaps you don't think so under the circumstances. I assume you are here about Elliot Robson?"

"Yes." Lex admired Castlereagh's desire to get to the heart of the matter. "If you know of our connection, then surely you know there is nothing to fear from the man. He may be an American, but he is here to assist me in creating an efficient arms manufactory."

"You don't find it suspicious that a man with his background has inveigled his way into your arsenal?"

Lex swallowed the frustration threatening to clog his throat. He splayed his hands in front of him. "I knew Robson through personal correspondence before I ever asked him to come to England and help me. I can vouch that he is an upstanding gentleman who happens to have been a former arsenal superintendent, and who has graciously agreed to share his knowledge for the efficiency and betterment of Britain's arms production."

"And now our countries are at war." Castlereagh's gaze was steady. "We've received word he might be a spy."

"I beg your pardon?" Those polite words were nothing like the ones scrambling through Lex's head.

"We are in the midst of war with France. The last thing we need is to engage on another front, and yet that's just what the Americans have agitated for." Castlereagh spread his hands wide. "Robson's credentials are precisely why he's suspect. He has ties with the American government and military, he was a soldier during the previous war, and he has vast knowledge of weaponry."

The idea of Elliot Robson—upstanding gentleman, conscientious family man, abiding friend—spying on anyone was so ludicrous Lex wanted to laugh. Instead, seeing the gravity in Castlereagh's face, he swallowed the sourness rising up in his throat. His words rushed out in a tangle of emotion. "He is a family friend, so of course I harbor no suspicions about him. I can assure you he is no spy."

"We've heard otherwise."

"I'm the eighth Earl of Lexden. Does my word mean nothing to His Majesty's government?"

The Secretary didn't move, didn't blink, didn't speak. A sharp, nearly painful silence fell upon the room. The ticking of the clock on the mantel grew louder and louder until Lex thought it might explode his eardrum.

At last Castlereagh tipped his head, his expression softening a fraction. "If it were left to me, I might accept your assurances regarding Robson. Others, however, are afraid to put much stock in your opinion considering your failure to take your seat in the House of Lords and your...recent display of character."

Everything circled back to the one moment he'd lost control, and their reservations were no doubt bolstered by his father's history of instability. Though, if Castlereagh spoke the truth, these other powers-that-be wouldn't have taken his word anyway. Because they didn't know him. He'd shut himself off, refused to participate in Society and politics, which had served his purpose then but was coming back round to bite him in the arse now.

He was going to lose Robson.

A fresh surge of panic iced his veins. With an effort he modulated all emotion from his tone and said, "The American government has threatened to punish him if he returns. The British government is expelling him for supposedly being a spy. He's in an untenable position. Is there nothing I can say or do?"

Castlereagh strode to the backside of his desk and leaned over it, palms flat. "You can watch your step."

Lex sharpened his gaze. "Are you threatening me, my lord Secretary?"

A vehement shake of the head. "No. That's a warning that others may be. The one who informed us about Robson's spying activities has made vague insinuations about your loyalty as well."

Drummond.

Castlereagh continued speaking, his voice barely audible above the roaring pulse of anger pounding in Lex's head. "I give such innuendo no credence, but the very fact that you brought Robson here has made it difficult for others to dismiss those suspicions. I'm sorry, there is nothing I can do for your friend."

The sickening realization of just who was behind this ghastly farce nearly knocked Lex off his feet. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knew he couldn't let Castlereagh see his fury. He couldn't add fuel to his already flaming reputation.

With a grim will, he replied calmly. "Your concern is much

appreciated. Thank you for seeing me, Castlereagh.”

He bowed and spun on his heel before the polite façade faded.
Drummond would pay for this.



Chapter Twenty-five



Eleanor and Portia dressed for the evening in a flurry of sarcenet, lace, ribbons, and giggles. Though concerned about the Robsons' imminent departure and Octavius's state of mind, Eleanor maintained a carefree demeanor for Portia's sake. Her sister-in-law had got into the spirit of things and seemed to overcome her worries of the morning.

After donning their gowns, having their hair dressed, and deciding on the appropriate jewelry, they spent an inordinate amount of time placating Henry and persuading him that he wasn't missing much by going to bed before the ball began. Two cheesecakes and a glass of lemonade improved the situation immensely. However, when Eleanor and Portia at last made it downstairs, Octavius was nowhere to be found.

Bickley, in the midst of overseeing last-minute details in regard to the arrangement of the rooms, informed them his lordship had not yet returned.

"Where did he go?" Portia asked, her voice rising in panic.

Eleanor took her arm and steered the girl into the sitting room, which had been torn apart in preparation of redecoration but was at least out of the way of the scurrying servants. She had so hoped Octavius would return with good news and Portia wouldn't need to hear that the Robsons were leaving. Alas...

"Dearest, an unfortunate situation has come up. The Robsons have been asked to return to America. Believing this directive to be unfair, your brother went to see the Foreign Office minister." Eleanor smiled bravely. "Let's hope his prolonged absence means he's making progress."

"Why would the government care that the Robsons are here?" Portia blinked in confusion, and Eleanor was only too glad it wasn't

petulance.

“Politics. Mr. Robson’s background has convinced the government he might be up to no good here. It truly doesn’t make a lot of sense, which is why Octavius went to sort the matter out.”

“Will Andrew have to leave as well?”

Ah, *this* was more like Portia. “I am not certain, but I don’t believe so. Mr. Robson indicated only he and Justine were told to leave. They were given permission to attend the ball tonight, however, so we can send them off in style. If it comes to that.”

For Octavius’s sake, she hoped it did not.

“A farewell ball won’t be nearly as much fun,” Portia said. “Especially for Lex. He enjoys Mr. Robson’s company.”

At this statement, Eleanor’s heart lightened. The girl had a long way to travel but at least showed signs of maturation. Until she opened her mouth again.

“I hope he can control himself,” the girl continued, crossing her arms under her chest. “He promised he would, but of course he didn’t know that the Robsons would be sent away. I’ll be mortified if he weeps at their departure.”

How ironic. Eleanor would once have given just about anything to see such deep emotion from the man.

A footman burst into the room, slightly out of breath. “My lady, the first carriage is just arriving. Mr. Bickley wants to know what is to be done, as his lordship hasn’t returned.”

Portia’s already disgruntled expression transformed into a perfect imitation of her brother’s scowl. Eleanor herself had no wish to greet their guests without her husband by her side. Even if he was discomfited by the crowd invading his house, Octavius would be a solid presence and would support her no matter what. If he were here. But he wasn’t.

She straightened her shoulders. “We will be there in a trice. Thank you, Richard.”

After the servant exited, Eleanor took Portia’s hands in a firm grip. “I need your assistance, dear sister. At any moment, members of the *ton* are going to walk through our door. I have no idea if they will be here to celebrate with us or to castigate us, but we must face them and I think we’ll be much more formidable if we can do so together. May I count on you?”

“Everyone will notice Lex isn’t here!”

“He will be. I know he will be. Until then, I need you.” Eleanor

tugged on her hands. "Portia?"

The girl shook her head, clearing the mulishness from her face. Eyes a softer, somewhat bemused blue, she asked, "Have you ever had a negative thought?"

Eleanor laughed and pulled her into a hug. "All the time. The secret is to not express them. Come, we can do this!"

She led the way to the top of the staircase, where they would greet their guests. Bickley had stationed himself at the foot of the stairs to announce everyone. Richard the footman stood sentinel at the door to let them in.

Portia slipped her arm through Eleanor's. Eleanor smiled and squeezed her hand, hoping to calm her own nerves as well. Ruthlessly she quashed those negative thoughts Portia didn't believe she had; Octavius would show up. Their guests would be charming and amusing, never disdainful or cutting. All would be well.

"The Duke and Duchess of Burnham," Bickley announced.

She and Portia traded relieved looks. A friendly face. The perfect way to start the evening.

Eleanor watched Alice ascend the steps in a stunning ice blue saracen gown with silver trimmings, and the duchess's shy smile dashed away her anxiety. "It's lovely to see you again, Your Grace. Thank you for coming."

"We were pleased to accept your invitation," the duchess replied. "May I present my husband?"

The duke was not what Eleanor expected. Though tall and fit, he was at least forty years Alice's senior. Thick white hair crowned a long, well-lined face. His cheeks were red, his eyes a friendly bright blue. Eleanor curtsied.

When she rose, a movement at the bottom of the stairs caught her eye. Octavius had just slipped in the front door. Despite the flutter of curiosity in her stomach, she nonetheless forced her attention back to the duke, greeting him earnestly and introducing him to Portia. Only when he stepped aside to bow over the girl's hand did Eleanor cut her gaze back toward the entry hall, seeing Octavius near the newel post staring up at her. His eyes held an apology. She gave him her warmest smile, but, from the stiff way he nodded and the exhaustion apparent in the slump of his shoulders, she knew he hadn't succeeded in his quest.

He held up a finger then waved a hand down the length of his

body: He needed to change. At her acknowledgment, he disappeared down the back corridor, presumably to take the servants' staircase to avoid running into the guests before he was properly dressed.

He was just in time, for Richard threw the door open wide and a bevy of Society's best-dressed crowded in. They had apparently decided to ignore the previous scandal and come en masse.

Just before the newcomers swarmed the stairs, Eleanor leaned over to whisper in Portia's ear, "Octavius is back. He'll be with us in a moment."

The girl's eyebrows flew up and she almost looked...happy. So Eleanor resolved to let Octavius know just what his promise meant to his sister.

The guests continued to arrive apace. Though most must have noted Octavius's absence, only one or two commented. Eleanor handled these remarks truthfully, with replies about a late meeting at the Foreign Office, and after awhile Portia relaxed into the charming manner she usually reserved for gentlemen.

At a lull in the receiving line, Octavius slipped between them. Eleanor could feel the tension thrumming through his body, but his voice was soft when he turned to his sister. "Apologies for my tardiness. Portia, you look lovely this evening. Blue suits you."

Eleanor wanted to grab him by the lapel and kiss him senseless. He couldn't have uttered more perfect words if she had told him what to say.

Portia thanked him with a generous smile. "May I head into the ballroom now?"

They gave permission, and off she went with a happy swish of her skirts. Neither of them had a chance to speak again before they had to return their attention to more guests.

When another pause occurred, Eleanor touched her husband's sleeve and shot him a questioning look. He put a hand to her back and leaned down. "The government won't relent. The Robsons must leave."

"Oh no." She reached up and embraced him briefly before the next couple mounted the stairs and required attention, and once the pair was off to the ballroom she squeezed his arm again. "Did you discover why?"

Before he could answer, the Robsons themselves were announced. Octavius took a deep steadying breath as they

approached, and Justine took Eleanor's offered hands and pulled her close, enveloping her with warmth and friendship. Eleanor returned the embrace wholeheartedly, squeezing her eyes shut against the sting of tears.

Octavius and Mr. Robson were shaking hands, while the latter said, "It's the damnedest thing. If they suspected me of being a spy, why didn't they bar me from the country when we first arrived?"

"At that time, no one had impugned your honor," Octavius ground out. "I regret to say that you have become embroiled in a personal matter between me and another. I apologize for the turn the situation has taken."

"No," Eleanor implored, turning. "Drummond did this?"

He jerked his head in reply.

How could Eleanor ever have thought him her friend? She had misjudged him to a frightening degree.

Mr. Robson shook his head. "Most regrettable."

"Mr. William Drummond," Bickley announced then, in an almost panicked voice.

The two couples turned in stunned silence to see that very jackanapes ascending the steps as if he owned the place. Eleanor immediately reached for Octavius's hand, but he shook her loose and headed down to confront Drummond.

Mr. Robson shot her a questioning look. With the slightest motion of her head, she declined his assistance. She had faith in her husband. He had promised to be here, and he was. He had promised to control himself—and he would. She didn't doubt him. Still, she gratefully inched closer to Justine when that fine lady linked their arms.



LEX PLANTED HIMSELF in front of the interloper and lowered his voice. "We issued no invitations to snakes. Get out, Drummond."

That familiar pernicious smile formed on the man's face. "I assumed my invitation was lost in the post. You cannot be so ungracious as to deny me the opportunity to bid a fond farewell to your American friends."

From the frenzied chatter behind him, Lex realized their other guests had noticed the arrival. He fervently hoped that Portia was too preoccupied to remark this confrontation on the staircase. If he wanted to keep her unaware, Drummond must be dealt with

elsewhere.

Lex took another step, putting him on the same step as his enemy. He threw his arm around the blackguard's shoulders and walked him down the stairs toward the study as if they were the oldest of friends. Drummond was too surprised to protest.

After steering him where he wanted, Lex closed the door and backed Drummond against it. "I warned you the other night and you didn't heed me. You've done irreparable harm to the Robsons. The only reason I'm not tearing you limb from limb right now is because my family deserves to have their reputations respected. Something you know little about."

"I simply wanted to speak to my sister." Drummond's sneer returned. "And dance with your wife again."

Lex drove his fist into the man's stomach. Then, while Drummond was doubled over, gasping for breath, he strode to his desk in hopes the distance would weaken the urge to finish the beating the bastard deserved. This could have been such a pleasant night if only the man had an ounce of decency. Instead it fell to Lex to attempt rationality, for Eleanor's and Portia's sakes, when his temper was near the boiling point.

He inhaled and glared into Drummond's red face. "I told you this feud was over. I meant it. If you care for your mother as you say you do, you will end it on your side as well." He withdrew a sheaf of papers from a locked drawer and slapped them down on the blotter. "These are mortgages on your father's London townhouse and your family's estate. It's a shame your father broke the entail. I can call in these notes at any time, and if I do, your mother will no longer have a place to live." He lifted his head and pierced Drummond with a glare. "Leave here and go to Lord Castlereagh. Retract your lie. After that, leave my family and friends alone. If you do all this, the mortgage on your mother's residence will remain uncollected—at least until after her death."

Drummond stood tall, though it obviously pained him to do so. "Don't try to pretend you're better than me, Lexden. You've been planning to ruin my family all along."

"Yes, I have." Six years of planning and countless hours of fuming, all would be thrown to the wayside. And doing so wasn't nearly as wrenching as Lex would have thought. His friends and his family were worth his time and emotion. Drummond wasn't.

"How do I know you won't change your mind and put my

mother out on the street anyway?"

Lex sighed. He didn't want to waste another minute on this blackguard. "It's time we acted as the gentlemen we are, Drummond. I give you my word. If you do the same, I'm prepared to honor this agreement. If you don't, you've been given fair warning."

"Portia..."

Always trying to take one more inch. If the very act itself wouldn't destroy his family, Lex would call out Drummond there and then. He dug his nails into his palms, searching for calm. Eleanor's face came to mind, and his temperature cooled a degree. "Don't push me. We'll discuss Portia at a later date. I have guests waiting."

Drummond's expression darkened. A minute ticked by. Then at last he stepped forward, hand out. "This has nothing to do with you, Lexden, and everything to do with my mother."

Lex skirted the desk. "Believe it or not, I'm glad you care enough about her to acquiesce."

They shook hands, and Drummond headed for the door.

"Have Castlereagh send a note after you speak with him."

Drummond nodded but kept walking.

The rhythm of Lex's breathing slowly returned to normal, and the rousing sounds of the orchestra playing a quadrille in the room above registered. *Right, guests.* He must return to the ball. Thank goodness returning there meant returning to Eleanor. He proceeded up the stairs and, with one final deep breath at the top, plunged into the yawning social pit that had once been his drawing room.

Everything looked as usual. Eleanor was chatting with a large group, Mr. and Mrs. Robson were dancing with fervor, Portia was flirting with a young man, and quite a large number of guests turned to stare at him. If they had come to witness a scandal, they were out of luck. And, despite wanting to clear them out so he could spend a quiet evening with his family and the Robsons, he would endure their presence for the rest of the evening. Eleanor and Portia deserved no less.

In that vein, he approached his sister. *His sister.* Drummond could do go to hell and back, but he wasn't ever going to get near Portia again.

"May I have the pleasure of the next dance, my lady sister?"

Surrounded by two young bucks and another young woman,

Portia turned to him with her lower lip pulled in. "Thank you, but I'm afraid I must decline. You see, I am already promised to Mr. Somers." She inclined her head toward the taller of her admirers.

Lex smiled. "Then by all means, do enjoy yourselves."

He bowed and backed away, more than relieved by the reprieve. He would have done his duty by Portia, but dancing wasn't an especially favorite activity of his. Being near Eleanor was.

At first he simply watched her. She smiled charmingly at everyone, even those who had a distinct hint of distaste on their faces. Graciously she leaned closer to the elderly Lord Darnley so that he could hear her. She guided Andrew Robson—he must have just arrived—to a shy-looking young lady from whom he soon coaxed a smile and a dance. She was everything a countess should be, and Lex hadn't even yet remarked on how lovely she looked this evening. At last she wore a gown made specifically for her and in the current mode. The squared green velvet bodice perfectly framed her breasts. The rest of the gown, a creamy satin, draped her curves in a sinful way that made him once again wish all these guests to perdition.

He started toward her but paused here and there to speak to their guests. It wasn't difficult to thank the cheerful ones for coming. He truly was grateful that not everyone had shunned them or showed up in the hopes of seeing another Lexden debacle.

When he arrived, his wife greeted him with a brilliant smile—which surprised him with a frisson of terror. *I love you*. The intoxicating feeling of that night had dissipated considerably, and her words were now something of a threat. He had no idea how to be loved.

She interrupted his reverie with a squeeze of his arm. "Thank you so much for keeping your promise to come back in time. It meant the world to Portia. You should have seen her smile when you arrived."

More expectations. Yet, the returns were worth it, or so Robson said. Hadn't he begun to believe it himself?

"Lex."

Eleanor was gazing up at him with a frown creasing her forehead, and he matched her expression. "Please don't call me that."

"I thought you preferred it."

"Not from you." Her use of his given name marked an intimacy

that he now quite willingly embraced. Not to mention it reminded him of the impudence he'd come to enjoy. "Never from you."

"Is that so, Octavius?" She nearly purred his name and leaned closer, impudent as always. "Do you know what I wish to do after all the guests leave?"

"No," he replied, "but I think I would like to join you."

Her soft laugh rode the waves of his pounding blood to every corner of his body. "That's good, because I would like us to retire to my bedchamber, light every last candle, and make love in the blazing brightness."

This part of her love he could handle. "It would be my pleasure to grant your wish. And *your* pleasure as well."

Heat smoldered between them, and her eyes turned as dark as the velvet of her gown. Then the spell was broken as Justine Robson approached.

"Such a lovely ball," the woman exclaimed. "I am so glad we were able to attend. The memories of this night, and your friendship, will keep me company during the long journey home. And to add to my hoard"—she tapped Lex on the arm with her folded fan—"I'm going to be presumptuous and ask you for a dance, dear Lexden."

As little as he liked to dance, there was no refusing this woman tonight. The way life progressed, he had a feeling he might need these memories just as much as Mrs. Robson—and in all honestly, possibly more.

He executed a regal bow. "I would be honored, madam."

The two of them, along with three other couples, were soon squared up for a quadrille. Mrs. Robson was light on her feet and took Lex's more stilted moves in stride, and at one point, as they came together down the line, she turned with a serious glint in her eye. "This will end well, Lex. Have faith. Once our countries have decided to lay down their weapons and seek peace, will you visit us in America? All of you."

Lex had no time to answer, as they turned in opposite directions, but he couldn't fail to note the optimism in her question. To Mrs. Robson, this separation was a mere bump in the road, a frustration to be endured until they could meet again. To him it was another bond cruelly ended by the machinations of the Drummonds. At least, it would be ended if his sacrifice did not work, and Lex would not know until he heard from Castlereagh. He could not say until

he'd heard for certain. Drummond might yet decide their vendetta was worth risking everything.

They finished the dance in a flurry of hops and skips. Lex kept hold of Mrs. Robson's hands and gave them an earnest squeeze. He wished more than anything that he could embrace her hopefulness, but with images in his head of Drummond's perfidy, their ship sinking and the war raging endlessly on, of Robson being tossed in jail by his government, it wouldn't be easy. For Mrs. Robson, though, he would try.

"We accept your invitation to visit. Henry will be over the moon with the adventure of sailing. And I..." He swallowed past the sudden thickness in his throat. "I will look forward to reuniting with the two of you. I genuinely hope the wait is not too long."

Mrs. Robson grinned. "We'll have such fun in Baltimore! You can meet the rest of our children, we'll go apple-picking, hunting for seashells by the shore. Oh! A visit to Washington is a must. I think you will be impressed by our growing capital." She was about to say more, but something over his shoulder caught her eye. "I think I spy Andrew over there. Would you excuse me, Lex?"

He bowed, and she was gone.

Turning, he scanned the room looking for Portia and found her relaxed and happy, in conversation with the Duchess of Burnham. Excellent. Next, he searched for Eleanor. She was near the window, so Lex headed that way.

Before he reached her, Mrs. Dryden beat him there.

"Mother!" Eleanor's eyebrows rose in perfect arches. "I didn't realize you'd arrived. Thank you for coming."

Mrs. Dryden made a show of surveying the room, her sharp eyes taking in every detail. "This is quite a gathering, my dear. The decorations are so exquisite. And the refreshments... I'm sure I haven't seen such an extravagant display in many a year."

Lex wasn't quite sure of her point, but he already didn't like the direction the conversation was heading. He hung back out of sight.

Eleanor smiled, seemingly with effort. "Has Papa accompanied you?"

Her mother sighed and placed a hand over her heart. "He's unwell again. The house is so difficult to keep warm. The exorbitant price of coal, you know." She waved her hand in front of Eleanor. "Not that such things matter to you. You clearly have money enough to burn on grand balls and gowns that must cost more than

three months' worth of coal. Of course, I'm ever grateful you even thought to invite your poor mother. I wish I'd had something else to wear besides this old rag. I do hope I'm not embarrassing you, but I could not afford to have a new dress made, not with paying the doctor and keeping decent food on the table for your father."

Eleanor seemed to shrink in upon herself, and she glanced uneasily from side to side. It seemed to take much effort for her to open her mouth in a reply, but the energy was wasted as Mrs. Dryden continued on.

"I just wish you had more concern for your father's health, Eleanor, and would take steps to ensure that our needs are taken care of. I shudder to think what would happen to him if *I* fell ill too."

Lex stiffened with anger. Good God, was Eleanor nothing to her mother but a pot of treasure to be dipped into again and again? Mrs. Dryden's concern for her husband rang so falsely even Henry would probably see through it.

"Mother..." Eleanor began ineffectually.

His wife was *never* ineffectual. Lex marched toward her as fast he could, intent on arriving before Mrs. Dryden could say another word. He'd not allowed Drummond to ruin this ball, and he certainly wasn't going to let Eleanor's mother do so. This was the Countess of Lexden's night to shine.

His mother-in-law had just taken a deep breath in order to spew forth God knew what when Lex stepped up and took her arm. "Mrs. Dryden, how wonderful to see you tonight. Let me escort you to the refreshment table. You will not believe how delicious the lobster cakes are."

He turned the older woman away from Eleanor, gave his wife a wink over his shoulder, and headed toward the corridor. At an alcove near the top of the stairs, his mother-in-law looked perplexed. "The food is the other way, my dear Lexden. Now that you mention it, I am quite famished."

Lex rounded on her. "You can eat to your heart's content, after you've agreed to stop this nonsense."

She blinked innocently. "What nonsense?"

"Do you even *know* your daughter? Do you know how socially adept she is, even in the most trying circumstances? Do you realize what a bold sense of humor she possesses? Can you not admire how even-tempered she is, a trait she has thankfully passed on to

Henry?" The woman's mouth had gone slack, and for once she appeared incapable of speech, so Lex pressed on. "Of course you don't. Because all you ever do is hound her for money. More and more money. You do the same to me, but I do not give a fig."

Alas, she found her voice. "Lexden! This conversation has passed the bounds of good taste. Are you about to have another of those dreadful episodes like you did at the Ardmores' last week?"

This was not about him. Lex shoved his hands behind his back in a more relaxed stance and dragged in a breath. "We are discussing you and your daughter, and *your* decided lack of variety in conversation with *her*. She is not a bank, Mrs. Dryden."

"I never!"

"You do. Always." He paused, swallowing his frustration that Eleanor deserved more, so much more from her parents.

Mrs. Dryden took advantage. "You have no idea what it's like to do without. Every time I think we have a little extra, poof! It's gone. He thinks he needs another painting, or a pair of boots, or a new horse to replace the one he bought two months ago. Meanwhile the house is so cold, and I can't put a decent meal on the table..."

The woman trailed off as her eyes filled with unshed tears that Lex did not want to fall. Nor did he want Eleanor harangued by a mother she couldn't bring herself to hate.

"Mrs. Dryden, let's make a deal."

"A deal?" the woman said with a sniffle.

He dutifully handed over his handkerchief. "Yes, a deal. Believe me when I say that Eleanor and I do not have any desire to see you living in misery. Therefore, I will set up an annuity—in your name—that will pay you a quarterly sum more than sufficient to cover your household needs and more besides."

She brightened considerably. "Oh, Lexden—"

He cut her off. "In return, you will talk to your daughter about anything *but* money. Ask her about Henry. Give her advice about her next ball. Let her complain to you about her beast of a husband. Do not ask her for money. If you have concerns about your financial situation even after I've set up the annuity"—he would surely regret this, but better him than Eleanor—"come to me directly."

He'd loosed his hands from behind his back, and Mrs. Dryden seized them, squeezing tight. "How can I thank you? I never would have guessed you could be so..."

Best she not finish that sentence. "You can thank me by not

mentioning this conversation to Eleanor. I'll tell her, and you can speak of other things."

"Of course, of course." Mrs. Dryden waved his handkerchief in a flurry of gratitude. "How much are you thinking...?"

St. Bartholomew save him. "I'll meet with my solicitor next week and then be in touch with the details. For now I'd suggest you fill a plate from the buffet and enjoy yourself."

In a move that surprised him, she drew herself up straight, leaned in, and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you, Lexden."

He watched her walk off, noticing for the first time how she moved like Eleanor: graceful, and now with purpose. He couldn't quite say he held any affection for the woman but perhaps now that her fears had been alleviated her true character would shine through. Only time would tell.

Lex turned, feeling surprisingly satisfied. Two dragons slain with no guests the wiser. He might be a muddled mess on the inside from his encounters with Drummond, Justine, and Mrs. Dryden, but at least he'd kept his madness at bay on this very important night. Now there was only...

"There you are," Elliot Robson said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I'm afraid we must return to the hotel now. We must be aboard the ship by first light. Might I have a word with you in private, though, Lex?"

He hadn't heard from Drummond one way or the other. He'd have to assume the Robsons still had to leave. If he didn't agree to this conversation, if he didn't say goodbye— No. At least this time he had a chance to say farewell.

He nodded mutely at Robson and turned to lead the way to his sitting room. No. Not the sitting room. He veered to the left and headed toward his study instead.



Chapter Twenty-six



I nside, he closed the door as Robson turned to face him.

“I received a note from Lord Castlereagh before we left the hotel,” the American said. “I sincerely thank you for your efforts, fruitless though they were.” He shook his head and sighed. “Life is a damnable thing sometimes.”

Though Lex agreed, he couldn’t dismiss his own culpability. “I apologize for Mr. Drummond’s action and accept that he wouldn’t have been set on such a course if not for our personal clash.” If only Drummond would send word...

Robson lifted a silver eyebrow. “It does seem as if the two of you have much to work out. Yet I cannot fault you for the action of another.” He lifted a shoulder. “You and I have accomplished most of what we set out to do at the arsenal, and I’ve left behind some rather comprehensive notes. I believe Mr. Collett will transition quite well to the position of superintendent. You needn’t fear my abrupt parting will derail the success you’ve worked to accomplish.”

Lex didn’t give a tinker’s damn about the arsenal anymore. He’d moaned to Eleanor that he couldn’t carry on his work there without Robson, but that wasn’t the crux of the matter and he could admit it, especially now since his need to destroy Drummond had diminished. He valued Elliot Robson’s friendship. He had learned much from the older man’s sage advice and pragmatic viewpoint and had come to care for him.

He opened his mouth but nothing would come. No polite words of farewell that would mask his emotional upheaval. No fond words that would solidify their friendship. No rude words that would earn Robson’s enmity and lessen the sting of his departure. So Lex just stood there blinking furiously.

Robson strode toward him and threw his arms around Lex's shoulders in a hearty embrace. "So much for thinking myself above politics and loyalty. I will not underestimate their power again. Do not worry overmuch, though. I have friends and I will not go quietly should my government try to prosecute me. For now, lad, I believe we should confine our farewell to four words. 'Until we meet again.'"

He withdrew and clapped Lex on the shoulder twice before turning to leave.

Lex closed his eyes. Just as the door clicked open, he finally managed to rasp out the words in reply. "Until we meet again."

The door closed just as softly as it had opened.

Lex scrubbed at his face. Then he turned and smashed his fist down on the desk.

A soft tap came at the door, then Eleanor's voice. "Octavius? The Robsons must be going and Justine would like to say... She'd like to speak with you."

Lex leaned over the desk, trying to find that elusive equilibrium others seemed to possess. After a minute of steady breathing, he thought he might be close, so he finally dragged himself outside.

Arm in arm, he and Eleanor walked down to the entrance hall where Portia and all the Robsons were saying goodbye.

"I wish you would come with us, my son," Mrs. Robson pleaded as she clung to Andrew, unabashed tears coursing down her cheeks.

He clasped her by the shoulders so he could look into her eyes. "I too regret the shortness of our reunion, dear Mother. However, I cannot possibly leave when I haven't finished my course of studies."

Elliot Robson rolled his eyes. "It might be helpful to remain nearer to Edinburgh if you wish to give any appearance of attending St. Andrew's."

"I'll miss you too, Father," Andrew said with a laugh, embracing him and then planting a loud kiss on his mother's cheek. When he stepped aside, Mrs. Robson approached Lex.

She smiled through her tears and dropped into a perfect curtsy. "For once, I'm going to try to remain decorous. Thank you, my lord, for your hospitality and—"

Lex pulled her into a fierce hug, cutting her off. He didn't—couldn't—say anything, but he knew that wouldn't bother her.

She squeezed him in return and said in a loud whisper, "Do bring my gallivanting son with you when you come to America, all

right?”

He nodded against her shoulder and caught the steady blue gaze of Mr. Robson. “Until we meet again, Mrs. Robson.”

After he let her go, she reached for Eleanor one last time. Then the Robsons were gone in a flurry of waves and farewells.

The footman closed the door, and Lex wanted nothing more than to escape upstairs with Eleanor. However, the sounds of a ball in full swing— carrying laughter, music strumming, feet dancing— bombarded him before he could even reach for her hand. God knew how much longer their guests would stay.

Portia, who’d been unusually quiet ever since Lex appeared, slipped past him and headed for the stairs. Noting that Eleanor and Andrew were in conversation, he went after her and caught up to her at the top.

“Are you enjoying yourself, Portia?”

She turned back with a genuinely delighted smile. “Oh yes! It’s been splendid. Thank you, Lex.”

At least he didn’t have to worry about his sister’s state of mind this evening. “I’m glad. If you wish, my offer of a dance still stands.”

“On that, I will take pity on you and refuse. I saw you dancing with Mrs. Robson, and if I had to guess I’d say dancing is not a favorite activity of yours and you are only trying to be polite. I appreciate it, though.”

“Thank you, Portia. You’re absolutely correct.” He waved a hand over her. “Besides, as pretty as you look tonight, I doubt you are wanting for dance partners.”

She giggled. “I’m not. Eleanor was right about that.”

“She generally is.”

Ahead, not one but two eager young bucks were staring giddily in his sister’s direction. Lex gave them both a slight nod, and within seconds Portia was laughing gaily and trying to decide who to dance with first.

As for Lex, he needed two things: Eleanor and cake. In that order.

He found her, fortuitously, by the refreshment table. Grabbing a bite-sized piece of spice cake, he muttered to her, “Will this night never end?”

“I know it has not been easy, but it’s also not been as disastrous as it could have been.” She reached up and brushed a crumb from

his lip. "In fact, some might say this ball is rather dull. I wouldn't be surprised if everyone decides to leave soon."

Lex snorted. "I doubt it. They will linger, waiting for something scandalous to happen."

Eleanor fluttered her lashes. "We could give them something to talk about."

Even though she was jesting, a shot of desire coursed through him. He took her gloved hand and pulled her close. "As little as I care for our guests' opinion, I am very tempted to call you on that dare. Except," he sighed, "for the small matter of Portia. I promised."

"You are exceeding beyond all measure on that promise, which is why—"

A commotion near the doorway distracted them and all those guests who weren't dancing. Bickley came rushing in, and he turned immediately as if to block the door. Oddly, his chest heaved as if he were out of breath.

"Oh yes," a high feminine voice trilled from the corridor, "please do announce me, Bickley. It is my due, after all."

The butler didn't move a muscle. Lex's veins iced over at the sound of that voice. Stricken into immobility, he could only watch in horror as the woman rudely pushed her way past his servant. And by now, the dancers had stumbled to a halt and all eyes were upon her.

"I can see this household needs better management." She threw her arms open wide. "Very well. I shall announce myself. Lady Lexden is here, my darlings! Terribly sorry I'm late. I suppose that makes me fashionable, doesn't it?" Then she laughed, an ugly sound that clawed at Lex's ears.

"Oh no." That was Eleanor. He could feel her hand upon his arm, but she sounded as if she were miles away.

Lex sucked in a breath, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. Trying to battle the fury building in his head. The guests all stared—in confusion, in wonderment, in awe, in disgust—at the dowager countess of Lexden who stood smiling before them as if her appearance were nothing out of the ordinary. As if she hadn't decamped to Edinburgh for over a decade. As if he hadn't wanted her gone forever.

Mrs. Dryden broke the frozen tableau. She approached Lex's mother with a welcoming smile. "My lady, it has been an age! How

do you do?"

The rest of the guests all began talking at once. Those animated whispers... Lex could well imagine what terrible tales they were telling.

She had no right to be here. None. The fury inside Lex escalated to rage. His breathing grew shallower as he watched people approach his mother with fawning curiosity. Her name would be on everyone's lips on the morrow. All the old scandals would be resurrected. Questions might emerge about Portia's parentage.

The shrill voice of the dowager countess carried over all the others. "Oh la! How I remember the balls I used to throw here."

That familiar red haze obscured his vision. *Enough.*

"Octavius!"

Eleanor's beseeching whisper was accompanied by a rough jerk of his arm, but it did no good. He glanced down at her. "If you'll excuse me, I need to remove that person from my home."

She stepped in front of him. "You can't. Remember your promise. And perhaps...perhaps Portia would like to speak to her."

"No." He just managed to keep from shouting.

She stroked his cheek. "After everyone has gone, we'll get rid of her. For now, just ignore her."

"My darling son! It is so good to see you."

There was no ignoring the woman when she swept up to them with a false smile and an overly loud greeting. She'd aged since he'd last seen her, but that was all he noted in his blinding wrath. Eleanor turned to face the countess, but she also continued to stand in front of him as if to hold him back.

"And this must be Lady Lexden. How pleased I am to meet you at last, my dear. That gown is lovely. Who is your modiste?"

"Why are you here?" Lex bit out. He suspected Drummond's hand in this too. Once the truth was confirmed, he would hunt the man down and kill him this very night, no matter the consequences.

Her brown eyes glittered, and she chuckled. "The first ball at Lexden House in how many years? I could not miss it!"

Lex wanted to shake her. It was a good thing, after all, that Eleanor stood before him. He repeated his question, each word suffused with a still mounting anger.

His mother looked from him to Eleanor and back again. "Why, Eleanor invited me!"

No. His mother was lying. Lex knew only too well how

experienced she was in that art. And Eleanor was shaking her head vigorously.

“I didn’t. I—”

Lady Lexden put out a bejeweled hand. “Oh, but of course you did, in the letter you sent me. So gracious of you.”

“You wrote to her?” Lex waited for Eleanor’s answer, the cold blade of betrayal poised above his chest.

Eleanor whirled around and placed her palms on his coat. “Octavius, please. I did write to your mother but—”

The knife plunged in, stealing his breath away and setting his ears to ringing. Eleanor *had* done this.

He grabbed her wrists and removed them from his body. “Spare me your excuses. You—”

His mother gave him a dismissive glance. “Goodness, but you are just like your father, Lexden. So insufferable. It was only a letter.”

His blood boiled over. But...he had promised Portia.

He dropped Eleanor’s wrists as if they were hot coals and addressed the room in general “I apologize, but I am feeling indisposed at the moment. If you will all excuse me. Thank you for coming.”

He strode out of the room without a backward glance and took the stairs to his bedchamber. His head swam with ugly thoughts. Eleanor. His mother... It was too much to comprehend.

“Lex, are you looking for me? I was just freshening up.”

Portia was coming down, which meant she had no idea who was in the ballroom. He couldn’t let her walk down there unaware. Hell and damnation, he couldn’t let her walk in there at all. A public ball was no place for Portia to reunite with their mother after all these years. But could he tell her the truth? Could he *not*?

“Yes, I was actually.” He took her arm and turned her back. At the top of the stairs, he took both of her hands and said, “I don’t think you’ll want to return to the ball.”

She frowned. “Why ever not? It’s more amusing than I hoped.”

“Our mother is here.”

Portia’s face lit up. “She is?”

“Trust me, you don’t want to see her.”

“Of course I do.” She yanked her hands away. “You’ve kept me from her all these years. It was wretched.”

Not this. Not now. “Father’s will kept you from her in the

beginning, and I had good reasons for continuing to do so. She's not fit to be anyone's mother."

"She's the only parent I have. I want to see her!"

Portia turned to go, but Lex stopped her. "If you want to speak with her, we'll arrange something for tomorrow." Privacy would help, though not much. Lady Lexden could be brutal on one's emotions, as Lex well knew. "Tonight will only end badly."

"I'm not a child any longer!" Portia wrenched herself away from his staying arm, blue eyes flashing. "My mother is here and I want to see her. If you choose to run away and hide, go ahead, but stop trying to run my life!"

His sister flounced down the stairs, heedless of his warning, still not trusting his judgment. Lex watched her petite form, knowing she was headed into an ugly situation. He hadn't left her alone that dreadful day all those years ago so he couldn't do so now, even though he'd rather have a tooth drawn than face his mother again.

He followed after Portia.



Chapter Twenty-seven



As Eleanor watched Octavius leave, a crest of sourness burned up her throat. She couldn't blame him for escaping. She wanted desperately to follow, not just to get away herself but to explain her actions. She didn't want this matter to linger between them.

"He always was a dyspeptic boy," Lady Lexden remarked to Eleanor as the other guests resumed their loud conversations, crowded the dance floor, and assaulted the refreshments table once again.

Eleanor turned back. Of medium height, the woman was gowned in a deep blue satin and net dress that was up-to-the-minute in its styling. Her hair, dark and thick, was swept up into a pretty knot. All in all, she was an attractive woman in her middle fifties who had kept her gently curved figure. After Octavius's description of her, Eleanor had expected someone a bit more...cronish.

"Your arrival caught us by surprise, my lady. If we'd only known you were coming..."

Lady Lexden laughed and waved a negligent hand. "Where is the fun in that? I do so love a good surprise."

Octavius did not. Most especially not when that surprise involved his despised parent. Eleanor hadn't invited her. She *hadn't*. She'd written, yes, but nowhere in that letter had she issued an invitation.

She had no idea what to say to the countess now, but she *must* speak to Octavius. The longer he had to brood and cultivate his anger...

Lady Lexden saluted Eleanor with her glass of sherry. "Splendid! Just splendid. I couldn't have produced a finer crowd nor gayer music myself." Her bright gaze flashed at something behind

Eleanor. "Well, look who has returned."

Octavius, preceded by Portia. The girl wore a nervous smile, while his features were set in stone. Eleanor marveled at his return, but still she wanted to hide her eyes from what was to come.

"Oh, aren't you lovely," Lady Lexden exclaimed. Then she lifted a hand to her mouth. "Goodness, you can't possibly be..."

Portia dropped a stiff curtsy. "Lady Portia Mayne."

Her mother threw back her head and laughed with relish. She pressed a hand to her bodice. "Darling Portia! Do forgive me. I haven't seen you since you were a wee thing toddling about."

"Why wouldn't Lexden let me come live with you?" Portia blurted out, casting a scathing sideways glance at her brother.

"Oh dearest, Edinburgh was no place for a little girl. My calendar was so terribly full, I was rarely about. It just wouldn't have done." Lady Lexden seemed to find nothing odd—or better still, hurtful—in this statement. Her voice dropped to a murmur as she also shot Octavius a look. "Too, your brother has never shown me the respect I deserve. After he assumed your guardianship, there was no point in asking him to let you visit me, not even when you were old enough to join me on my social rounds."

Octavius made an unintelligible sound which, all in all, Eleanor admired for its lack of clarity.

Portia's eyes boggled. "You...you never asked Lexden if I could come live with you? You never insisted that a little girl needs her mother? You never wrote to me?"

Eleanor took the girl's gloved hand just as Octavius laid one on her shoulder.

The countess drew back as if offended. "I knew you were well cared for. The steward sent a note every six months assuring me." She offered a brittle smile. "If you'd like, I'm sure I could lead you on a merry chase through Edinburgh society and have you married off to the wealthiest duke in Scotland by the spring."

"How surprised I am that *you* haven't remarried after all these years," Portia replied with a sudden unexpected sarcasm.

Lady Lexden failed to notice. "Once is enough for any woman."

Somehow, Eleanor managed not to put a hand to her throbbing forehead. This ball was the complete opposite of what she'd dreamed. First Drummond arrived uninvited, then her mother arrived invited but begging, then the Robsons had to depart early and for the foreseeable future, and now Lady Lexden shocked them

with an appearance. At least the rest of the guests seemed to be enjoying themselves.

“Eleanor, I can’t thank you enough. It is so lovely to be back in London,” the dowager countess declared. “I really must replenish my wardrobe. We must go shopping this week. I’m sure invitations to all the latest affairs will be flooding my doorstep, and I cannot be unprepared.”

Octavius bristled beside Eleanor. He was furious, and Portia wasn’t far behind. How did one gracefully oust one’s mother-in-law from an event at her former home? Better yet, how did one gracefully end a ball early? Eleanor surveyed the room, hoping for an answer.

Across the room, the Duke of Burnham met her gaze. After a quick word in Alice’s ear, the couple approached. Eleanor was glad to see the duchess’s friendly face, but she had no idea whether to be relieved or to steel herself for some new horror.

The duke spoke first, to the countess. “Lady Lexden, I haven’t seen you in years, but I don’t think you look even one day older. That nasty Scottish climate must be good for something.”

“Burnham, you old devil.” Lex’s mother wagged a finger at him. “I see you haven’t changed either.”

The duke introduced the dowager countess to his wife, and Lady Lexden made a comment about Alice’s youth. The duchess flushed, but her husband passed the remark off as a compliment. He then winked at Eleanor on the sly.

“Would you all mind if I stole the countess away for a few moments? I know there are some other guests here who would love to renew their acquaintance with her.”

Gratitude nearly overwhelmed Eleanor. He was offering to take her away, even if only for a brief time. She nodded vigorously.

Lady Lexden reached out to pat Portia’s arm, but the girl backed away, right up against Octavius, who steadied her. “Portia dearest, it’s been nice chatting with you. Do think over my invitation, unless you’d prefer Lexden to choose your husband.”

The dowager countess flitted off with the duke and duchess before Portia could even blink at that statement.

“Seventeen years, and that’s all she has to say to me. Even you, Lex, came to visit me once a year,” Portia lamented.

“Don’t give me credit for that paltry effort,” Octavius grunted.

Portia’s bottom lip began to quiver.

Before Eleanor could pull her into an embrace, Octavius tucked his sister up against his chest. "You are free to retire for the night, Lady Porcupine. Shall I escort you upstairs?"

She nodded wordlessly, and tears began to fall as the two of them slipped out of the room.

Eleanor was left alone. As usual, she must carry on.

What a disaster. She felt stretched to the snapping point and it hadn't escaped her notice that her husband hadn't so much as looked at her. The Duke of Burnham was still steadfastly leading the countess around the room, but Eleanor couldn't fail to see the line of exasperation running across his forehead. She directed a heartfelt smile his way that he accepted with a nod. She must give the housekeeper permission to bash her over the head with a pot if she ever proposed hosting a ball again.

"Will this night never end," she mumbled to herself.

"Bored by your own ball? Tsk, tsk."

"Mr. Robson..." Andrew had snuck up behind her, all charming grins and light-hearted quips as usual, but Eleanor was in no mood for the likes of him.

He looked at her and immediately sobered. "What's happened?"

Eleanor gave him an incredulous look. "Where have you been?"

"I stepped out into the garden. A man needs a respite from the dancing now and then."

Eleanor sighed. "We've had an unexpected guest. Lady Lexden joined us."

"Lady...?" Andrew snapped his head up and scanned the crowd. "You must be quizzing me. He's never said much about her, but I do know Lex would never allow such a thing. Where is he, by the by?"

"He accompanied Portia upstairs. The evening has been...rather trying."

Andrew scrutinized her. "Would you like to be rid of her?"

"What do you mean?" Eleanor asked, afraid to show too much hope. From what she had seen, Mr. Robson wasn't good for much except a laugh and a compliment. That was probably too harsh, but with her head pounding and her heart devastated by her husband's anger, she wasn't feeling too charitable.

His answering smile was almost wolfish. "I'll wager I can get her, and possibly a large percentage of this crowd, to leave. If, that is, you really wouldn't mind seeing the end of this affair?"

Eleanor would pay all her pin money for just such an outcome.

“Please, do it. Thank you so much, Mr. Robson.”

“My pleasure. Anything for my friend Lexden—and in turn, you. Point me towards her ladyship.”

Eleanor discreetly directed him to where Lady Lexden was in conversation with the Burnhams and Eleanor’s own mother. Andrew bowed with a flourish and made his way toward his target, though he stopped short of her and began talking to the two gentlemen nearest. Eleanor watched raptly, which was undoubtedly bad form, but not many were paying her any mind.

Andrew spoke to the gentlemen with great gestures, and, it seemed, a carrying voice, for the countess’s group all looked his way. Within moments he and the other two gentlemen came back towards Eleanor. They bid her a quick adieu, which included a cheeky wink from Andrew, and then they left.

Lady Lexden wasn’t far behind. She approached with an apologetic shake of her head. “I fear I am overtired from the journey, my dear. I’ve taken a room at the Pulteney—didn’t want to presume on your hospitality—so I am set for the night. I’ll call on you tomorrow.”

Lex’s mother had glanced at the door at least three times during that speech, and she barely waited for Eleanor to say goodbye before she escaped. Furious whispering behind cupped hands proceeded from one small group to another, and soon Eleanor was saying goodnight to a large majority of her guests. Soon after that, as the stragglers noticed the thinning crowd, they too began leaving.

Alice returned with her husband, who smiled.

“Well,” the duke said, “that was masterful. There is no better way to entice a crowd away than to hint at an affair that is bigger, better, and even more scandalous—the Prince Regent, a pig, and a poke bonnet.” Burnham chuckled. “Mr. Robson was enthusiastic and convincing, I’ll give him that.”

“I owe him a great debt—and you too, Your Grace,” Eleanor said. “I thank you, and I hope that I may count you as a friend, as I count your dear duchess.”

He bowed over her hand. “I would be flattered, my lady. The duchess and I would love to have you and Lexden to dinner soon. Now that he’s socializing once again, I would like to get to know him. His father was an interesting fellow.”

Eleanor wanted to ask, but she did not. “We would be honored

by your invitation, sir. Alice, it was lovely to see you again.”

The ducal couple left, along with a few final others, and then, blessedly, all the guests were gone except for one.

“Goodness, I’ve never seen a crowd disappear so quickly,” Eleanor’s mother exclaimed as the musicians packed away their instruments. “I’m so sorry, Eleanor. Lexden’s mother practically begged everyone to go with her to another ball. Very rude of her, if you ask me.”

Eleanor almost laughed. “It’s all well and good, as I’m nearly done in. I hope you won’t mind if I excuse myself?”

She’d fully expected a set-down for turning her mother away yet again, but instead she received a pat on the arm. “Of course, dear. But may I call upon you tomorrow afternoon? Perhaps we could...” She paused as if thinking hard, then opened her eyes wide. “Spend some time with Henry in the nursery.”

“C-certainly,” Eleanor said, shocked. “That would be lovely. Thank you, Mother.”

Her mother nodded and left.

Alone at last, Eleanor let out a sigh, more than ready to wilt into a heap. But she could not. First she must check on Portia and then her husband.

Portia was already abed, but the girl answered Eleanor’s soft knock. Inside, Eleanor sat on the edge of the bed and said, “I don’t even know what to say, little sister. That was...”

“A dream and a nightmare colliding,” Portia murmured into her pillow.

“I’m so sorry you had to meet your mother that way. I started the correspondence with her, but I did not invite her to the ball.”

“I should have listened to Lex,” Portia replied with a sniffle. “He tried to stop me from going back to the ballroom.”

Ah. And when he couldn’t, he’d followed his sister back—an act that Eleanor knew must have cost him much. She hoped that sign of emotional strength boded well for their imminent discussion.

She let Portia vent her spleen about the whole situation, and eventually the girl ran out of steam and tears. Eleanor leaned over and kissed her on the cheek before leaving, and outside the door she yawned. No rest for the weary, though.

Eleanor made her way to her bedchamber in search of Octavius. It was empty. His own chamber was occupied by a sleeping Henry, so she gave the boy a whispery kiss and then snuck down to the

ground floor. Octavius must be in his study. Except that he wasn't. And the morning room was empty as well. Had he left the house entirely? The only rooms remaining, besides the kitchens and servants' quarters, were the sitting room and the nursery.

The nursery. Where Octavius had sat for hours distracting his little sister from the devastation their parents had wrought. This didn't bode well.

With goose pimples spreading across her flesh, Eleanor flew up the three flights of stairs. She found Octavius sitting on the window seat, his back to the glass, head in his hands. She approached slowly, but froze when he growled out, "Don't."

She reminded herself he had a right to be upset. With her.

"I am sorry I wrote to your mother behind your back. I did *not*, however, invite her here."

Since Henry wasn't sleeping here, the fire hadn't been laid in days. Eleanor wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the chill. Then she added, "I wrote her a fortnight ago, right after Portia arrived and when I learned she was still alive. She wanted to know her mother. We didn't think it was fair that you kept the two of them apart."

Octavius rose abruptly, towering over her. "I am *not* a monster."

The words whipped out and lashed her. "I know, but at the time
—"

Looking up into his face, she broke off. This wasn't Octavius. His eyes were dark shards that had cut out all his humanity; his scowl was hardened and ingrained. This was the man who'd believed the worst of her and banished her to Essex after just a few months of marriage.

"I cannot believe you did this to me. *You*. I thought Drummond had done this. But you..."

His hot breath and bitter disillusionment washed over her. Nothing she could say would reach him right now. As before, nothing would sway his opinion. She'd thought they'd come farther than this.

Chest heaving with indignation, he brushed past. She didn't turn around but stared out the darkened window as a bellicose silence dominated the room. If she could hold her tongue long enough, the Octavius she loved would reemerge. The key was to avoid engaging in his self-pitying rants.

The carpet muffled his tread, but there was no mistaking the

heated anger that nearly suffocated her as he approached from behind. He inhaled as if gathering every last drop of discordance hovering in the air then said, "I never wanted a house full of Society's hypocrites. I never wanted a family. I wanted to be left alone, and yet here I am, hosting a ball for you and my sister, taking our son to the park, bribing your mother to stop treating you like a moneylender, doing my damndest to give *you* what you want even though much of it is difficult and uncomfortable for me. And this is what you do for me in turn?"

Bribing my mother? Eleanor pushed the question aside and turned to face Octavius, still barely recognizing the man. Yes, he'd made an effort over the last fortnight or more, but so had she. *So had she.* She tried to regulate her voice but six years' worth of frustration coated her words.

"I left you alone when you wanted to be left alone. I came running to London at your beck and call. I lied to people I respected. For you. I forgave you for believing that snake Drummond. I *loved* you. And what do I get in return? Your refusal to give me the benefit of the doubt."

"You could have told me after you'd written her. You had ample opportunity after you knew what she was. Hell and damnation, you *knew* what she did to me and Portia! I can understand that you wouldn't care about me, but what about my sister? She was shattered tonight."

Eleanor's grip on any sort of hopefulness was slipping out of her grasp. She softened her tone and made one last try. "Octavius..."

"My name is Lexden." His rebuttal was swift, low, and brutal. "This is what you call love? No thank you."

He didn't mean that. Her love was everything to him; she knew it.

Or was that simply the wish of a twenty-year-old girl reappearing at the most inopportune moment? He had never uttered a single word about returning her love. There was certainly nothing resembling love in the harsh planes of his face right now.

"Love is not some passive thing that just lies there between us," she said. "We must actively keep it alive. *We*. Not just me. Love means we are beholden to each other, beholden to giving the other what they need, not what we think they should need. All I ever needed was your love. I can see now I had my head in the clouds. I am not certain such a thing as *your love* even exists."

She *was* loved to some degree. By Henry, by Portia, by the Robsons, by her father in his own distracted way. She was mature enough and wise enough to realize she could hope for no more. And she was strong enough, at last, to not allow her husband, however much she might love him, to tread all over her dignity.

Shoulders back, gaze direct, voice unwavering, she said, "I will be returning to Mayne Castle tomorrow." She paused, daring him to gainsay her. When he stayed wisely silent, she continued, "Portia and Henry will come with me. There is nothing for us here. Unlike some people, I haven't time to throw temper tantrums in the nursery."

She swept past him then and out into the corridor. Once she'd pulled the door shut behind her, she sank against it. Though she'd had no other choice, it had taken all her willpower to walk away from him. Somewhere inside that hulking brute was the man she loved, and whether or not she'd ever see him again she had no notion.

Pushing away from the wall, she stumbled down the stairs, the tears coming fast and furious. She must blot out the memory of his distorted expression. The pain was there, but it had been subsumed by the anger. If he ever wanted to talk about that pain in a rational manner, he knew where to find her.

Her mind numb with exhaustion, fury, and heartache, Eleanor found her maid and submitted to the woman's sleepy assistance as she, bless her, worked silently. After an interminable twenty minutes, she was finally alone in her bedchamber. She crossed over to the door that led to Octavius's room, for after a quick peek at Henry she intended to sleep like an adolescent.

Poking her head around the door, she spied Henry nestled in the center of the enormous bed. Sprawled next to him, Octavius slept on his side, one hand stretched out to rest on her son's chest.

That wasn't fair.



Chapter Twenty-eight



“S
ir! Sir, wake up!”

A violent shaking of Lex's arm accompanied those words. He bolted upright at the panic in Henry's voice, and before his eyes could even focus he was asking, "What is wrong?"

"It's not fair." The boy was standing beside the bed, fully clothed, his face twisted into an unattractive scowl. "Mama says we are going back to Mayne Castle and you aren't coming with us."

Lex could go if he wanted; she didn't have any right to keep him away from his own estate. And he could demand that Henry remain with him. Portia too, if he were so inclined. All of this only brought a grimace to his face, though. Why had it come to this?

Henry grabbed hold of his hand. "Please come, sir. We can find your cricket bat and play on the west lawn. We can spin and spin and spin. We can even fish if you'd like."

He would not miss this child's incessant chatter. Nor the cock-eyed smile. Nor the warm feel of a small hand gripping his fingers. He'd lived six peaceful years without a small boy sleeping in his bed. What a relief it would be to do so again.

"Pleeeeeeease."

"No." Lex snatched his hand back, took hold of Henry under the arms, and sat him on the mattress while he himself stood. "I have too much work to do. Important work. For the government. General Wellesley cannot fight the blasted Frogs without weapons. Not to mention the Americans," he added with a grimace.

"Then let me stay here with you."

"No." If nothing else, the boy had inherited his mother's persistence. And, as angry as he still was with her, Lex wouldn't keep Eleanor from her son. Besides, one couldn't brood in tormented, self-pitying silence with a happy-go-lucky child

clamoring to go to the park. "You will go with your mother and that is that."

He strode toward the dressing room, but Henry kept talking. "When will I see you again?"

Somehow, Lex stopped himself from slamming his palm against the dressing room door. He looked back at his son. "I don't know, Colonel."

On that sickening thought, he slipped into the dressing room.

Head aching, he shaved and dressed quickly. He'd already been up once this morning when a note duly delivered from Castlereagh informed Lex that while the secretary had talked to Drummond, there would be no change in the status of the Robsons; the man's sudden change of heart had done nothing to convince the other government ministers. Lex would like to think this day couldn't get any worse, but he knew it was about to.

As much as he couldn't bear to see Eleanor and once more feel the sting of her reproach, he had to say goodbye to Henry and Portia. Though the state of his marriage was back to where it had been six years ago, he would not punish his son or his sister for his own inability to make things work. That mistake, at least, he would not make again.

He headed back to his bedchamber, hoping Henry was still there and he could say his farewell in private. Of course the boy was gone.

Lex trudged downstairs. Trunks and baskets covered the marble floor. Maids dithered, packing items into luggage at the last minute, barely snatching their hands back before a footman grabbed a piece and lugged it through the open door to the waiting carriages. Eleanor and Bickley stood in conference near the morning room door. Just seeing her caused Lex's heart to shrivel. He'd been so stupid to place it in her trust.

Suddenly, he froze on the bottom step. His mother. If Eleanor had offered that woman a bed in this house... "Where is she?"

Eleanor stared at him woodenly. "Portia is helping Henry collect his toys."

"No. Lady Lexden. Where is she?"

"At the Pulteney Hotel, as far as I know."

Lex's next breath was easier to take. Still, the air between him and Eleanor was stiff and unyielding. They had both said some very ugly things last evening. Hadn't he always known this day was

inevitable? Whether she was to blame or he and his irrational thinking were...

There was nothing more to say. There was everything more to say. His lips wouldn't move.

"I'm ready," Portia declared behind him, slicing through the stifling mood. She passed him but then turned back. "Thank you for allowing me to return with Eleanor. About...about Mother..."

She sniffled, and the rest of her question disappeared in a gasping sob and a flow of tears down her pink cheeks. Lex reached out his hand, but before he could even touch her his sister fell into Eleanor's arms.

Eleanor. The one who had *brought* their mother here. He would never understand Portia. Or his wife. Or any other female, no doubt.

"I cannot find my cricket bat," Henry declared, planting his feet in front of Lex and facing his mother and sobbing aunt. "I'll have to remain here until I find it."

Eleanor continued to pat Portia's back. "Henry..."

They would never be gone at this rate.

Lex crouched down and turned his son around. "Colonel, you must accompany your mother. Who else is going to protect her from bandits?" When Henry opened his mouth to protest, Lex squeezed his arm. "You have permission to use my cricket bat at Mayne Castle. And"—he took a deep breath—"should I find yours, I will deliver it to you myself."

A wide grin spread across the boy's face. "You will?"

They needed to go. All of them. Lex craved the silence and peace their departure would bring. He needed to be alone with his madness and failure.

"Yes, of course," he replied, blinking hard to banish the stinging at the back of his eyes. "Now, go on. Protect the ladies as only one of Wellesley's officers can." He rose quickly and stuck out his hand. Best to keep this civil and efficient.

With great reluctance, Henry shook his hand. His momentary joy had dissolved. "Goodbye, sir."

"No." Lex gave the boy's hand an extra shake. "Until we meet again."

He could feel Eleanor's gaze boring into him. If he would just beg her stay, those eyes seemed to say, then Henry wouldn't have to leave. She wanted so much. There was no hope for him.

Portia had righted herself, and she had sopped up most of her tears, so Lex reached out and pulled her away from Eleanor.

“Write to me if you wish, Lady Porcupine. I promise I’m a better correspondent than conversationalist.” And just as soon as the waters calmed a bit, he would invite Portia to visit him and he would try to explain, though the task seemed impossible, the wretched history of their family and the truth about her parentage.

She nodded. “Thank you. Will you give my regards to Mr. Andrew Robson?”

With great restraint, Lex didn’t roll his eyes. “Yes, of course. Now go. I think you’re going to love Mayne Castle much more than Somerset.”

He certainly did. How he longed to go back. If he found Henry’s bat, he would have an excuse for the trip, but that would mean confronting Eleanor and her expectations and his failures.

He waved Henry and Portia through the door. Then, though he ordered his feet to turn and take him to the solitude of his study, Lex found himself outside, shading his eyes from the blazing sun. One of the coachmen hefted the last trunk onto the second carriage while a footman assisted Eleanor’s lady’s maid inside.

Eleanor put her arm around Henry’s shoulder and tried to guide him to the front carriage where Portia already waited. When the boy merely shuffled his feet, his mother called his name in a strident tone Lex had never heard her use with him. Henry picked up his feet but not his shoulders, and he made quite the tragic figure mounting the carriage steps. If his stomach wasn’t twisting itself into knots, Lex might have laughed at the drama of it all.

At the top step, Henry turned and waved forlornly, cinching that knot in Lex’s stomach into a sharp pain. Lex raised his arm in farewell. As Eleanor followed the boy in, he told himself to go back inside. Darkness and silence awaited him in his study.

Instead, he watched the footman raise the carriage steps and close the door.

The coachman took up the reins and with practiced ease set the vehicle rolling down Hereford Street. At last, peace. Well, as peaceful as things could be when those knots continued to coil and kink inside Lex’s gut. He hadn’t eaten breakfast. That must be the problem. Except that he wasn’t hungry.

He stood there on the pavement, unable to move, unable to take his eyes from the carriages traveling slowly toward the corner. And

then the lead carriage stopped.

Lex ignored the acceleration of his heartbeat. Portia had probably forgotten something.

The door swung open and Henry leapt down.

Well, then. Perhaps the boy had remembered where his bat was. He took off running toward Lex, but the carriages, inexplicably, after further disgorging Henry's nursemaid and a portmanteau, began to move away again. From Lex. From Henry.

With his son careening down the pavement, Lex crouched again and caught him around the waist. The child was laughing wildly.

"What's wrong?" Lex asked.

Henry gulped in a huge breath. "Mama says I can stay!"

"What?"

"She says you need me more than she does right now." The boy shrugged and then grabbed Lex's hand and pulled him toward the house. "I'm to stay and make certain you find time to play. So first things first, we should go to the park again. I think I remember now where my bat is and—"

"Henry." Lex pulled on his hand to slow him down and collapsed onto the front steps, keeping the child, the still smiling child, in front of him. She'd done this for Henry's sake surely. Whatever he thought of Eleanor as a wife, he couldn't fault her as a mother. He cupped his hand around his son's cheek and said, "You have the best mother in the world, do you know that?"

"Yes, sir."

The boy didn't, not fully. Someday he would, though. Especially if he ever spent much time with either of his grandmothers. Ah well, children only lived for today, not tomorrow. Right now, Lex could live with that philosophy.

He stood and hoisted Henry in his arms. "I'm glad you are staying."

"Me too," Henry replied before throwing his arms around Lex's neck and squeezing. "Can we go to the park now?"

Lex squeezed him back and turned toward the front door. "Absolutely. To the park it is."



"ELEANOR, ARE YOU QUITE all right?" Portia asked as the carriage trundled its way north through London.

Staring hard out the window in an attempt to keep the tears at

bay, Eleanor ignored her for a moment. When she was able, she turned and smiled. "Why, of course. I'm happy to be heading back to Essex."

Portia frowned. "Please don't put on your all-is-well smile for me. I'm not Society. How are you *feeling*?"

The girl did deserve better than false positivity. "Absolutely wretched," Eleanor managed to say just before her tears made their escape. She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a handkerchief.

While she dabbed at her eyes and bit her lip to keep from deteriorating further, Portia reached over and awkwardly patted her back. Amidst her jumbled thoughts and aching heart, it occurred to Eleanor that the poor girl didn't know how to comfort someone because she had never had anyone to comfort. Never had anyone to comfort her. And that made Eleanor cry all the harder.

Face buried in her handkerchief, it took her a minute to realize Portia had moved closer and secured her arm around Eleanor's shoulder in a hug. At that point, Eleanor turned and fully embraced her sister.

"Why do I have the feeling my brother has made you this wretched?"

Eleanor sniffled and tried to compose herself. "He's maddeningly good at it. Last time I left London I was relieved to be going. Now I wish he had given me a reason to stay."

Portia drew back a little. "Never say you are in love with him?"

"I am afraid so," Eleanor admitted with a sigh.

"You've betrayed me," Portia replied. "Though I must admit I saw it coming."

"I've betrayed myself."

Eleanor had always believed falling for Octavius would be disastrous. Yet, everything had been going so well. She'd gambled against herself. Octavius had grown, and she'd expected him to make amends this morning, not see her off without a by-your-leave. Alas, her first inclination had proved true.

And yet...

"Why did you leave Henry? Lex doesn't deserve him if he's hurt you this badly."

"Life is never that simple." Eleanor gestured with her handkerchief. "Henry wants to be with his father, and I can't deny him that wish. Especially not when Octavius has finally embraced fatherhood. Not even when it tears my heart up that Henry chose

him over me.”

Her boy had never been away from her for more than a day. Of course he had his nurse, but would he miss Eleanor come bedtime? Would he blame Octavius for his mother not being there?

Worse, would Octavius tire of the boy? No. She had to have faith in her husband’s desire to forge a relationship with his son. She wouldn’t have sent Henry back if she didn’t. Plus, she wholeheartedly believed Octavius would send Henry back to her when it was appropriate. He wasn’t the monster who had once threatened to take her son away. But, now how many mornings would Eleanor wake without her son bounding in, all smiles?

Portia folded her arms. “I don’t think I want to have children.”

“I think I can understand that sentiment coming from you.” Eleanor laid her hand on the girl’s arm. “I’m sorry about your mother. I played my part in that debacle by contacting her with such presumption. I must confess I thought Octavius’s perception of her was wrong, and that’s why I said nothing even after he and I spoke of her. I never wanted to put either of you in the position you were in last night.”

“I didn’t believe him either. He tried to warn me. He didn’t just tell me no.”

Eleanor sat up a little straighter. “Really?”

Portia nodded. “He found me and tried to explain why I hadn’t lived with her, but I completely disregarded him and went charging back into the ballroom.” Her jaw tightened. “Of course, he could have told me years ago.”

“He was trying to protect you from her indifference.” Portia looked up sharply, and Eleanor squeezed her arm. “I’m not saying it was the right course of action. I’m simply trying to explain how he thinks.”

“Good luck,” the girl muttered.

Eleanor sank back against the cushion and sighed. “It’s a daunting task.”

The carriage grew quiet as both she and Portia became lost in their thoughts.

Portia was fiddling with the ribbons on her gown when she spoke again. The scenery rushing by was greener and bluer now. They had reached the countryside.

“How do you know for certain you love him? I thought I loved Mr. Semple, but even before Lex told me the truth about him I can’t

say I *longed* for him. I was upset when Lex denied us permission to marry, but I look back and I can easily see how Mr. Semple wasn't right for me. But how does one tell without hindsight?"

"I recognize your brother's many faults. I do. I think part of loving anyone is being able to accept their faults, and I'm willing to do that for Octavius." She had hoped he could do the same for her. He couldn't. "I also see the beauty that lies beneath his imperfections: generosity, a strong sense of protection, a willingness to bend. Usually."

"I'm sorry he's hurt you. Is this the end then?" Portia asked.

Eleanor smiled ruefully, realizing the truth. "Here's the thing about love. It's very optimistic. I am still waiting for Octavius to bend."

"And if he doesn't?"

Eleanor said nothing. Something must have shown on her face, though, for Portia reached out and caught up her hand. "I apologize. That wasn't well said of me."

Linking their fingers, Eleanor sighed. "I'm still too optimistically in love to see beyond the hope. He'll come. He'll bend." She turned more fully toward Portia. "But whatever happens, I don't want you to lose what's grown between you and your brother. He cares about you, Portia."

"What's to stop him from turning against me too?"

"He won't. Please don't think that. He's always loved you and, in his odd way, always tried to protect you. He's just not very good at showing people how he feels." At the girl's skeptical look, Eleanor rushed on. "It's different with you. You're his little sister. Dearest, do you have any memories of the day your father died?"

Portia shook her head.

"It was a terrible day for your family, but the most important thing you need to know is that your brother spent hours in the nursery with you, distracting you from all that was going on. He was aware of all the horrible things that were happening, but he protected you above all. He loved you then and he always will. He just might not ever be able to tell you so. Look for the love in the things he does, Portia. It's there. Keep your eyes open."

"Like when he didn't tell me that Mother didn't want me? Like when he refused to allow me to marry that dastardly Mr. Semple?"

Eleanor nodded at each of these things, though she wasn't thrilled with the way he'd handled them. But with luck he would

get better.

“Lex said I could write to him. I think I shall do that.”

Good. If nothing else, the Mayne family was on the mend after all these years. And if she, Eleanor, wasn't a part of it...

That didn't bear thinking about.

Portia laid her head back and closed her eyes. Eleanor gazed out the window, glad to be alone with her thoughts once more, missing Henry dearly. What were he and his father up to right now?

Octavius's sister spoke again, more quietly this time. “He's a fool if he doesn't bend.”

Eleanor smiled. “Portia, I love you. You are the sister I have always wanted.”



Chapter Twenty-nine



Lex and Henry spent their mornings at the park, doing everything a boy could dream of. Except fishing, of course. In the afternoons, Lex tried—and failed—to get Henry to remain at the house with his nursemaid. Instead, the boy insisted on accompanying him to the arsenal.

Truthfully, Lex was finding it difficult to say no to Henry at all. The child still slept in Lex's bed. His tin soldiers were strewn about Lex's study. They ate together in the dining room because, as Henry noted, "Who likes to eat alone?" So of course Henry came to the arsenal and became instantly enthralled with the boring machine and its many different parts.

To be fair, Lex was grateful for any and all distractions the boy provided. At least with the chatterbox present he didn't have much time to think about the Robsons. Or Eleanor. Or the fact that, as much as he was enjoying this time with his son, he wasn't entirely happy. Nowhere near it. And of course Lex realized—he'd have to be a lackwit not to—Eleanor had left Henry with him because that's what he *needed*. Just like she'd said about what a person did for love. Eleanor knew more than anyone how little Lex deserved a relationship with this boy, and yet she'd selflessly given him up.

On this, their fourth day alone, Lex and his son were ensconced in his study. A warm, heavy breeze drifted through the open window, and an accompanying ray of sunshine fell across a battalion of tin soldiers. Henry sprawled on the carpet, lazily moving the infantrymen.

Lex reached across his desk for the letters Bickley had recently brought. He shuffled through them, uninterested, until he came across one from Lord Palmerston, the Secretary at War.

He stared at it for a long moment. What could the government

have to say now that Robson was banished? Had Drummond managed to wreak even more havoc? Despite knowing how angry he should be with Drummond, how he should be punishing the man for failing despite what was likely a real attempt at correcting his malfeasance, Lex hadn't been able to maintain his fury these past few days. Indeed, he'd rarely thought about the knave at all.

He broke the seal and opened Palmerston's letter.

Lord Lexden—

As to your question regarding the location of the 48th Regiment..

He'd forgotten all about his inquiry on Henry's behalf. "Colonel, come here."

Henry settled one last soldier into place before rising and climbing onto Lex's lap, where Lex handed him the letter.

"Read it out loud. Lord Palmerston has information for you."

The boy straightened, and Lex looped an arm around his waist to steady him. "Lord Lexden. As to your question regarding the location of the 48th Regiment of Foot, I can tell you with certainty that General Lord Wellesley did indeed lead the regiment down the hill at the Battle of Talavera. As to your request, should Lord Corby furnish me with a letter for the general, I will be glad to post it with the next outgoing dispatch."

Henry turned with a grin. "Lord Corby. That's me! I can write to the general?"

"Absolutely."

"Right now?"

Was there any other time for young Henry?

Lex found a piece of foolscap and handed it, along with a quill, to his son. "Write out your letter on that. Once you have perfected it, you can copy it onto a piece of vellum."

Henry moved around to the other side of the desk and began scratching out letters. "Can I write to Mama as well?" The quill stopped moving and the boy looked up. "Actually, I want to see her. She tells me better stories at night. And she pretends to be the lady in the dungeon for me. Can we visit?"

"No."

Apparently, he could refuse the boy.

"But I miss her. Don't you?"

"No."

Just because he thought about Eleanor every moment Henry wasn't chattering did not mean Lex missed her. Just because he

awoke early every morning and sneaked into her dressing room to catch a fading whisper of her scent did not mean he missed her. Just because he lay awake every night recounting Henry's daily antics to her in his head did not mean he missed her. He was still angry with her. The emotion, though, like his waning fury at Drummond, had dulled to half-heartedness. Or maybe it was eclipsed by anger at himself.

"Pleeeeeease?"

Bickley's efficient knock prevented Lex from having to cruelly crush his son's supplication. "Mr. Andrew Robson to see you, my lord."

"Escort him in," he told the butler. Then he turned to Henry. Much as he enjoyed the boy's company, he was desperately in need of more mature conversation after four days. "You may spend a few minutes in greeting Mr. Robson, and then you will retire to the nursery where you may finish your letter to the general. And write to your mother if you wish, for we are not going to Mayne Castle."

The last directive earned him a scowl—which miraculously disappeared when Andrew walked through the door. Henry greeted the man with enthusiasm and waxed delightedly about his opportunity to write to General Wellesley. Then, much to Lex's surprise, the boy took his paper and quill and graciously left the two of them alone.

Andrew collapsed into the chair facing Lex's desk. "Good to see you. Have you quite recovered from that ball? More to the point, has Eleanor?"

Must everyone speak of his wife? Even Bickley managed to mention her at least twice a day. "Eleanor and Portia have removed to Essex." That should stifle any further conversation on the topic.

"I don't blame her for wanting to escape," Andrew replied with a shake of his head. "Even knowing your feelings about your mother, old man, that was very poorly done of you, leaving Eleanor to deal with her and the rest of the guests."

That wasn't fair. Was it?

What isn't fair is the manner in which you have once again blamed Eleanor for another's actions.

Lex shifted in his chair. That wasn't his father's voice chiding him from the depths of his mind; it was his own, and the acknowledgement made him that much more uncomfortable. He swiped a hand down his chin and glanced at Andrew. "When do

you return to Scotland? Your studies will not await you forever, you know.”

Andrew laughed, though there was nothing joyful in the sound. “I don’t want to discuss my paltry affairs any more than you want to discuss yours. We are a sad lot, are we not? The ne’er-do-well American and the self-indulgent earl. Shall we toast our faults?”

Lex had promised Elliot Robson he would speak to Andrew. Now was as good a time as any.

“You know you can’t avoid settling down forever. When are you going to take responsibility for your life?” he asked. But a dreadful feeling curdled in Lex’s stomach as he did. *He* was the one who needed to take responsibility for his life. What in God’s name had he done? Memories of his actions, of his words, congealed in his brain. Heavy with the awfulness of his behavior, his head dropped into his hands.

“Good God, man, you really do look as if you need a drink. May I?”

Lex flicked a hand in acquiescence. Glasses clinked, liquid gushed, and a drink plopped onto his desk. He really didn’t want it, but perhaps the brandy would calm the panic coursing through his blood. Lex sat up and tossed back half of the glass’s contents. Andrew watched with raised eyebrows.

As the brandy burned its way to his stomach, Lex tried to form a coherent thought. “I just— What was I—? Andrew, I drove her away. I ruined everything.”

His friend swallowed a healthy dose of his own drink. “Ah, then there was more to it than just your leaving Eleanor to fend for herself.”

Lex finished his brandy, but the horror didn’t lessen. Weeks ago, he’d told Eleanor he “couldn’t do this,” couldn’t make their marriage work even as a charade. In truth, he’d had no desire to make a success of it. Now he had the desire but also proof that he wasn’t truly capable of being married. Or worthy of being loved. Especially by a woman like Eleanor.

“It was ugly. I was ugly,” he admitted to his friend. He was under no obligation to relate his every offence, but it seemed that whenever he did finally realize the error of his ways, he had to talk about it. “She rang a peal over my head and left. I deserved no less.”

Andrew leaned forward. “Shall I help you prepare to beg for

forgiveness? You can practice your speech on me.”

Lex shook his head, almost too afraid to say the words in his head aloud. They came out anyway, barely above a whisper. “Some things cannot be forgiven, especially after all my past transgressions.” So many transgressions. Truthfully, Eleanor had every right to leave him and never look back. He’d been right all those years ago: It was better to keep to himself and spare others his madness.

In that vein: “There is something you can do for me.” At Andrew’s raised eyebrow, Lex continued, “Will you escort Henry to Mayne Castle in the next day or two?”

The question alone made his chest ache, but it must be done. Henry belonged with his mother and Lex had no right to keep them apart.

“If you take him, you can speak to Eleanor,” Andrew pointed out.

“No.” He would have no idea what to say. He couldn’t dwell on this. It must be done and done without delay. “Andrew, please. Can you get away?”

“Of course. Tomorrow, if you truly wish it.” The man stood and ran a hand through his unruly hair. “I can see you are in no mood to listen to reason today, but perhaps you will see things in a new light by morning.”

More likely he would be miserable, considering how disappointed Henry would be, but Lex walked Andrew to the front hall and thanked him for his assistance. They made arrangements for Andrew to arrive at noon and convey the boy back in Lex’s own carriage. Twice Andrew opened his mouth to speak further, but upon looking Lex in the eye thought better of it. Finally, he simply took his hat and walking stick from Bickley and left without another word.

Lex took a cowardly turn and went back to his study instead of informing Henry of his imminent travel plans.

Dinner was a pleasant affair, at least for Henry, because Lex still had not told him about his departure. Afterwards, at Henry’s request, they read aloud from *The Secret of the Cavern* and then it was time to tuck the boy in.

Clad in his nightshirt and giggling madly from being tossed onto the mattress no less than five times, Henry finally consented to crawl beneath the counterpane and lay his head down. Lex sat on

the edge of the bed and brushed rumpled hair off his son's forehead. He wasn't certain which would cause him more pain: if Henry was happy to return to Mayne Castle without his father or if he was devastated to go without him. Whatever the case, Lex couldn't put the announcement off any longer.

"You are going to get your wish, Colonel. Tomorrow you return to your mother."

How sweet was the smile that graced the boy's face. As much as he dreaded the separation, Lex knew he had done the right thing.

"When do we leave, sir?"

Lex cleared his throat. "You leave at noon. Mr. Andrew Robson has agreed to escort you. Won't that be an adventure?"

How quickly that smile vanished. "Why aren't you coming with me?"

"You know I must get the arsenal functioning. And I should probably visit my other estates. I've also been derelict in taking my seat in the House of Lords, a situation I should rectify. As well, I mean to move from this house and must secure another. So you can see that I am impossibly busy and cannot come with you."

Lex reached out to smooth Henry's furiously furrowed brow, but his hand was swatted away. "I won't ever see you again, will I? It will be just like before, when you never came to visit."

Those shiny, fat tears were Lex's undoing. He gathered Henry up, and the boy flung his arms around Lex's neck. Earlier he'd stripped off his coat and waistcoat, so now the hot wetness fell onto his shoulder and soaked through the linen of his shirt.

"Sir, please come with me. I will give you...two shillings, threepence if you will."

Oh God. Lex squeezed him harder but said nothing.

"That's all I have. I want Mama but I want you too. Please, sir."

This time Lex forced himself to speak. "I can't."

Henry wrenched away and threw himself face down in the pillow. His words were muffled but had no less of an impact. "I knew you didn't love me."

Chest burning and head pounding, Lex fisted the counterpane in a bruising grip. As much as his brain was telling him to walk out the door, his heart wouldn't let him. He could *not* let another son of Lexden think he wasn't loved.

He let go of the abused coverlet and stretched out beside Henry. The paralysis in his chest eased and his head cleared. He splayed a

hand over his son's back and leaned closer. The words slipped out much easier than he ever would have thought. "Henry, I do love you. I promise I won't abandon you ever again."

A few snuffles and huge gulp later, "You'll come to Mayne Castle?"

Lex sighed and gave Henry a nudge so he would turn over. "No. But..." He rushed on when the familial scowl began to emerge on his son's face: "You can spend half your time there with your mother and the other half with me. That's fair, isn't it?"

The boy looked as if he wanted to disagree, but in the end he reached out and patted Lex's arm. "Say it again."

No need to ask what. After having said it once already, Lex had no compunction repeating it. "I love you."

All vestiges of the scowl disappeared, and the boy smiled. His boy. "May I go with you to visit your other estates? And can you please find another house close to the park? What's wrong with this house, anyway?"

Lex chuckled and pulled Henry to his chest, relaxing into the mattress. "Yes, you may come with me to Somerset and Wiltshire." He didn't say so, but he planned to teach Henry about estate management just as his own father had, under the guise of riding and adventures. He hoped to God he could keep the insanity under some sort of control for as long as possible so he could give Henry a normal life. "As for this house, I find it no longer suitable. I am ready for a change but I will note your desire as to location."

"Thank you, sir." Henry yawned and snuggled closer. "So, am I still to go with Mr. Robson? He is great fun and Aunt Portia will like to see him."

Lex swallowed a groan. "I'm certain she will. Yes, Mr. Robson will accompany you. I will write to your mother and inquire if I might have you back in a fortnight. Will that suit you?"

"I s'pose. I should really like to show you my favorite places in the castle though."

"Another time perhaps." Lex's muscles flinched at the possibility of seeing Eleanor. The disgust on her face would be unbearable. He was the ogre she'd always believed him to be, and he couldn't inflict himself on her anymore.

"May we go to the park one last time in the morning?" the boy asked in a sleepy voice.

"Of course, Colonel."

Lex willfully put Eleanor from his mind and rubbed Henry's arm. Within a minute his son drifted off, his breaths even and deep, and Lex lay there in the semi-darkness, comforted by Henry's solid form curled within the embrace of his arm.

The boy hadn't reciprocated with a declaration of love, and Lex was glad of it. It was better for him to love Portia and Henry as best he could without requiring any strong emotions from them in return. As had been clearly demonstrated the week prior, he didn't know what to do with someone else's love except crush it beneath his selfish anger—much like his mother had done to his father. He was just like *her*. He was mad like his father and selfish like his mother. Never was an insult more deserving. He'd inherited the worst from each of them.

Portia, at least, was free from the bonds of his father's affliction. As for their mother...

Lex carefully untangled his arm from Henry, kissed the boy on the forehead, and slid off the bed. A few minutes later he was ensconced in his study, a solitary candle dimly lighting the room. The subject of mothers still rattled around in his brain. Eleanor's mother was no better than his own, putting her own wants and needs above those of her only child. He'd made a bargain with her at the ball, and he hoped she and Eleanor could start anew. Mrs. Dryden had called the day after, asking to see her daughter, to Lex's surprise and satisfaction. She'd turned wary when he'd told her Eleanor was back in Essex, but he'd reassured her that their agreement was still valid. His mother-in-law then announced that she would perhaps journey to Mayne Castle in the coming weeks. It was a step forward.

Lex sat up straight. Could his own mother be bribed into more appropriate behavior for Portia's sake? The last thing he wanted was to see his mother again. But for Portia...

To the Pulteney he would go then.



Chapter Thirty



Early the next morning, before Henry even stirred, Lex stole out of the house and set off for the Pulteney Hotel in Piccadilly. He wasn't ready for the encounter, but he doubted he ever would be. Best to simply do it.

Before he could change his mind, Lex entered the building and asked the maitre d'hotel if the dowager countess was available to see him. He was shown into a small sitting room that faced a lush cheerful garden, the sight of which did not elevate his mood after some half an hour of waiting. At last his mother arrived in a frothy swirl of yellow muslin.

"Lexden, you don't know how happy I am that you've paid me a visit." She waggled a slender finger in his direction. "Though I am not best pleased at the hour you chose to call."

Lex stared at her for a long moment, tamping down the urge to walk out. He reminded himself to be more like Eleanor. Open, forgiving, willing to listen. God, he wished she was by his side for this conversation. But she wasn't, and that was entirely his fault.

"I apologize for coming so early." His fingers drummed against his thigh as he searched for the civility that would get him through this. "I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Oh." Her voice was flat. "I thought perhaps you wished to welcome me back to London."

Was she really so oblivious? Did she not realize what she'd done to her children?

No. He couldn't go down that path. She was who she was. Life, and the effect of others, no doubt, had shaped her just as they had shaped him. He was here hoping to understand the family better.

He looked up and caught her eye. "Did you ever love him?"

She held his gaze for a brief moment and then moved to the

window. Her jaw tightened just before she addressed the glass panes. "I liked him well enough when we courted. He was a trifle too melancholy sometimes, but he absolutely doted on me."

The breath Lex was holding escaped in a soft exhalation. He'd been afraid she would pretend ignorance about who "he" was. He took a few more steadying breaths before continuing his inquiry. "He loved you devoutly. Why did you...?" It was difficult to keep his tone and words from veering into accusations. Best to keep it simple. "Why?"

"He was draining the life out of me!" She turned toward Lex, her brown eyes flashing. "At first his attention was gratifying, but as the years went on he became so unstable." Her lip curled. "He was forever telling me how *devoted* he was to me, but then he'd either become crazed and run off to do something wild or he'd fall into the dismal. Either way, I couldn't live, I couldn't breathe. I just wanted a normal relationship, not that nightmare I lived in where I might wake up to a loving husband or a frenzied man who decided to ride backward on his horse across the estate at full gallop or a despondent man who didn't want to live another second in this world."

So you turned to other men, looking for the security of normality.

And each time she had, she'd driven his father further out of his mind. Had there ever been any hope for such a marriage?

"Did you find happiness—living the way you did?" he asked. She'd twisted the knife further and further into his father's heart, but had she meant to hurt him or had she only been trying to make herself happy?

"I don't see why this conversation is necessary, Lexden. My marriage to your father is well in the past."

He closed his eyes and pictured Portia, concentrating on the love he owed her. Even so, it took a valiant effort not to lose his temper with his mother. When he spoke at last, he thought only the barest hint of anger seeped through his tone. "My father is dead. His death, and your infidelity, have had an enormous impact on the lives of your children. I am trying my damndest not to judge you. All I am asking for is honesty. I think Portia and I have a right to know certain things."

"Honesty? That's what you want?" The countess waited for him to nod. "Very well then. I was happiest when I was away from him, and so I took every opportunity to get away. And, truthfully, I was

freed by his death."

He'd known. Still, the words sent a ripple of grief through him. No one's death should cause another such obvious relief. Immediately after his father took his life, she had run out of the house and not returned until the next day. Where she'd gone, he didn't know. She had, however, crept in the servants' back entrance the following day and played the grieving widow to an exceeding height—in front of visitors at least. After the funeral in Essex, she had left Lex and Portia there and returned to London briefly before heading off to the likes of Florence and Naples, ostensibly because she was ill with grief. Her letters told a different story. Oh yes, she'd written to him, describing her travels, sending quick sketches of churches and landscapes. He'd written back at first, but she never responded to anything he said. She would simply talk about her own life. Eventually he'd concluded that she was attempting to stay in his, the eighth earl's, good graces for the day he reached his majority. She had been quite surprised, on that day, when he'd told her he wanted nothing to do with her.

He looked at her again now, her expression still defiant, though with a hint of wariness at the edges, no doubt due to his continued silence. So, this was it then? No matter what, he could never have a normal life with Eleanor. It was inevitable that he'd drive her away and someday...someday she'd be freed by his death.

Lex turned away and rubbed his neck. He hadn't accomplished much in coming here, except to realize that his parents had been a completely mismatched pair who made each other miserable. And he was repeating the past with his wife.

Well, he might as well hear all the ugly truths at once. "Did you know Portia wasn't my father's daughter?"

His mother didn't hesitate in the slightest. "Of course. You're a grown man. I think you can reason for yourself why there is a nine-year age gap between the two of you. The truth was obvious to both your father and me."

Lex ground his teeth. "That truth killed him."

"That sounds judgmental, Lexden. Your father knew about Portia from the moment of her birth, and he still adored her. He loved you both very much—when he was in the right frame of mind."

Too brief, that. Lex had to force his next questions out of his mouth. "Why did you leave Portia and me? Did you not love us?"

She laughed, though there was nothing happy in the sound. "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I loved you. You were the most darling little boy, always by my side, always happy to see me and hear about the balls I attended the night before. But then, around the time you turned nine or ten, you became more distant. Almost scornful of me. It was difficult to be around you."

That would have been about the time he figured out the discord between his parents, and the cause of it.

"You always took your father's side and thought he could do no wrong," she lamented. "You blamed me for his death. I know you were just a boy, but you were blind to so much."

Lex stared at her, wanting so badly to contradict her as he'd always done. But that vulnerability in her eyes was real. Whatever he'd suffered at the hands of his father's affliction, she must have suffered ten times more.

Her lips began to tremble, but she managed to whisper, "He didn't kill himself because of my affairs." She waited, as if expecting Lex to challenge her statement. When Lex remained still and silent, she went on. "Those were nothing new. He'd been blue-deviled for weeks. I'd never seen him so hopeless. I tried to bring him out of it, tried to cheer him up."

It took two or three tries, but Lex swallowed the emotion clogging his throat. "I heard you shouting."

She blinked up at him, tears clinging to her long lashes. "He'd been waving that gun around for over an hour. I tried everything. I thought if I made him angry enough, he'd come out of it."

Tears broke free and streaked down his mother's cheeks. This was the third woman brought to tears before Lex in the last few days: Portia, Mrs. Dryden, his mother. Not Eleanor, though. As horrible as he'd been, she'd not shed a tear in front of him.

Once again, Lex handed over his handkerchief. His mother dabbed at her eyes and sniffled as he said, "I'm sorry for what you lived through. I'm sorry that your marriage wasn't what you needed." She raised a skeptical eyebrow, but he said, "I am, truly. But I don't understand why you left Portia and me. Father's death destroyed us, and then you left us to fend for ourselves emotionally. For the rest of our lives."

The countess crumpled onto the sofa and buried her face in the handkerchief. This visit was not at all what Lex had expected. If anything, he'd have sworn his mother didn't possess any deep

emotions. But, as with most things, he was wrong. Again.

He lowered himself into the chair nearest the sofa and waited for her answer.

“At first, th-the freedom went to my head. With the burden of living with your father lifted, I...I didn’t want to be encumbered by you and your sister. I knew you’d be sad and devastated and I couldn’t... I just wanted to *live*.”

Lex cleared his throat, which constricted ever tighter. He’d wanted the truth. He’d known coming here wouldn’t alleviate any of his pain.

His mother raised her head, her eyes semidry now, though unfocused. “After I returned from the Continent, after you shunned me and threatened to cut off my funds if I came back to London, I was embarrassed. I couldn’t imagine facing you and Portia again, seeing the condemnation in your eyes. I told myself you were both better off without me.”

The words she’d tossed off at the ball, the ones that had echoed around his head for days, besieged him again: *You are just like your father*.

“Were you afraid that I was as crazy as him?” He couldn’t look at her, but he had to ask so he stared at the windowsill. “Is that why you stayed away from me?”

His mother snorted. “You’re nothing like your father.”

Lex dragged his gaze to her face. “You said I was. The other night at the ball.”

“You aren’t.” She slid over on the sofa so that she was closer to him, but she didn’t reach out to touch him, for which he was grateful. “I say lots of untruthful things when I don’t want anyone to focus on what I’m doing or saying. Granted, I’ve only seen you twice recently, and you’ve been angry both times, but I’ve seen no sign of madness, Lexden. Not like your father’s. And from what he told me when we fought, his instability started very young.”

“I’m not just angry,” Lex declared, holding her gaze.

She broke the eye contact and studied her hands. “You’re hurt.”

Lex stood. “I must be going. My son is waiting.”

As he reached to grab his hat from the nearby marquetry table, Lex’s mother captured his hand with both of hers and tugged until he looked down at her. “I’m sorry. I know that probably isn’t worth much, but it’s true. I’ve made too many mistakes to even try to reconcile them, but I am sorry for the hurt I’ve caused you. And

Lex..." She rose, still holding his hand. "You are not like him. If anyone could recognize that madness in another, it would be me."

Lex nodded. He hadn't expected to learn anything earth-shattering from her, but he'd come away with one sad new truth: After all these years, he felt just as sorry for his mother as he did for himself and Portia.

Extracting his hand from hers, he grabbed his hat. "I really must go. One last thing, though. I intend to find a new residence here in Town. If you would care to live in the Hereford Street house, you are welcome to do so. If not, I will have my agent lease it out."

New light dawned in the countess's wary eyes. "Are you allowing me to return to London without a reduction in my allowance?"

Lex sighed. "I am saying that I have my own life to live. You may do as you please with yours. And no, I won't reduce your allowance. My only requirement is that you not contact Portia unless she initiates a correspondence with you."

His mother waved a hand in acceptance. "Of course. Whatever you wish. And if I were to call on you... Would you be at home to me?"

She'd asked. He couldn't say no. "Most likely." Then, with another sigh, he donned his hat and bowed. "Good day, my lady."



IN THE CARRIAGE ON the way back, Lex closed his eyes, contemplative. Though she could put on a good show, as evidenced by her performance at the ball the other night, his mother wasn't the monster he'd believed her to be. Like he wasn't the monster everyone else believed him to be.

His mother also thought she'd "made too many mistakes to even try to reconcile them." Just as Lex once believed. But according to Elliot and Andrew Robson, mistakes were a natural part of life. When—*not if*—you made mistakes, you had to try to set things right.

So, he'd done that with Henry and Portia and now his mother. What about Eleanor?

The carriage rolled to a stop. Lex climbed out and entered the house. All was quiet, so Henry must still be asleep.

But what about Eleanor?

For God's sake, his thoughts about her were just as dogged as

the woman herself.

Though he knew it would only cause him more grief, he ascended the stairs and stole into his wife's room. It was dark and still, completely lacking the vivacity she brought wherever she went, but memories inundated his brain. And to his great surprise, they weren't as painful as he expected. Here Eleanor had rightfully rung a peal over his head for thinking she'd lain with Drummond. She'd been frustrated and angry but also forgiving, despite not letting him utter an apology. In this room he'd finally acknowledged Henry as his son.

Lex neared the bed. Here, in these safe intimate confines, they had opened not only their bodies but also their souls to each other.

What about Eleanor?

This about Eleanor: He loved her.

He sank onto the bed and fell back. He loved her perseverance, loved her generous heart, loved the way she mothered their son, loved her smile, loved her chameleon eyes, loved her forwardness in bed. Loved her when he'd thought he wasn't capable of loving anyone. Hence, her supposed "betrayal" had cut twice as deep.

Eleanor always knew what to do in any given situation; he admired that about her and trusted her decisions. But when she'd corresponded with his mother—before she knew how Lex felt about the woman, he reminded himself—he'd been knocked sideways by the havoc. In the hushed calm of the morning air he acknowledged how Eleanor couldn't have anticipated his mother's reaction to her letter. The night of the ball he'd been nothing but blind, but that was no excuse. None at all. Fury over that trivial matter had been nothing but a disguise for his fear. Fear of being loved, fear of loving, fear of turning into his father. He'd torn asunder the one person who had dared to make herself vulnerable to him in the last two decades, the person who'd done it out of love. What a fool he was. He'd turned his back on her for what—a night's worth of anger? An opportunity to feel sorry for himself?

Lex reached for Eleanor's pillow and drew it to his chest. A whisper of her scent reached his nose, and he stared at the canopy above, picturing Eleanor in his mind, hearing her purposeful words.

You should know by now that I'll never give up on you.

He was married to a generous-hearted, forgiving woman who loved him. He'd told her she was too forgiving once, and what had she said?

I know. And there's nothing you can do about it.

Lex bolted upright, slashing his hands through his hair. Had she truly meant it when she'd said she would never give up on him?

Of course. Eleanor meant everything she said. He could make amends. At the very least he had to try. He loved Eleanor and had failed her; therefore he must do what he could to repair the damage he'd caused.

Awake at last—both literally and figuratively—Lex went to work. He took a quick peek in the other room and saw Henry was still asleep, so he slipped down to his study and wrote a note to Andrew. Next he found Bickley and informed him of his hastily made plans. To Lex's surprise, the old butler's eyes widened in what looked like approval. But only for the briefest moment, and then Bickley bowed with his usual indecipherable nonchalance.

Plans made, Lex swept into his bedroom and leaned over the still slumbering Henry. "Awake, my boy. Today, at long last, we return to Mayne Castle."

The boy stretched and yawned. Then he sat up straight and narrowed his eyes. "You said 'we.'"

"I did," Lex agreed with a broad grin. "I regret to inform you that Mr. Robson will no longer be accompanying you. You will have to make do with your...your father."

It was the first time he'd ever called himself Henry's father aloud. At last the title seemed to fit.

"Yay!"

Henry leapt to his feet and hopped around the plush mattress, his nightdress flapping around his thin legs, so Lex hooked an arm around the boy's waist and dragged him to his lap. "Colonel, we haven't much time to get ready."

"I will dress quickly, sir!"

With a salute, he scrambled off Lex's lap and marched out the door.



Chapter Thirty-one



Eleanor lifted her gown as she stepped over a root that had tripped her no less than three times since she had returned to Mayne Castle. She had traversed this garden path countless days over the past six years, but only in the last week had she been so lost in thought as to forget where she was and succumb to clumsiness.

She emerged from the shrubbery facing the back of the castle. As caught up in the trials of London life as she'd been, she hadn't missed her Essex home. But being back again and looking now upon the lawns blazing green and bright, and with the July sun warming the centuries-old stone to a dark reddish-brown, she realized how much she loved it here.

Bittersweet as it was without Henry, she had no wish to return to London. Though, if she had to in order to see her boy, she would. Five days without him was four and a half too much. The castle was too quiet, and she longed to have his little body snuggled up in her arms.

Five days. Octavius's obstinacy was stretching her patience. Could she possibly have been wrong? Had she, once again, overestimated his capacity for change? For kindness? For thinking of anyone other than himself?

She must have. Her optimism was finally turning its back on her.

Through the glass doors off the small terrace, Eleanor slipped into the sitting room leaving them open enough to allow a breeze. Portia was gone for the afternoon, invited by the vicar's daughter for tea with some of the other local girls. How comforting it would be to crawl back into her bed and hide from the world. Hide from the failure of her marriage. Again. But such melancholy wasn't in Eleanor's nature. Remembering that she had the Burnhams and

Andrew Robson to thank for their support the night of the ball, she decided to begin her correspondence.

She was just arranging her paper and quill on the desk when a footman entered with a bow. "A letter for you, my lady."

He handed the paper over and was gone almost before she had time to thank him. The letter was thin, and she froze when she recognized the writing.

Octavius. At last.

Flipping the letter over, she traced the seal, hesitant to open the missive. But, who was she fooling? This might be the olive branch she'd been longing for. Herein might lie the apology she deserved. This letter, in the script of the Earl of Lexden, might constitute his first use of the words "beg" and "forgiveness."

Eleanor laughed at herself then stood, pacing over to the glass terrace doors with the note in hand. She hesitated only a moment longer and then broke the seal.

The letter consisted of only four words. Her blood began to simmer as she silently read them over and over again: *I must see you.*

No apology. Just need.

The words began to swim in a red haze before her eyes. He had her heart, he had her son. She had nothing left to give. She shook the letter and couldn't keep her thoughts from spilling out of her mouth. "If you think for one minute, Octavius Rupert Henry Mayne, that I am ever again going to hie off to London at your beck and call..."

"Now *that* is the Eleanor I know and love."

At the sound of that baritone voice, she whipped around so fast she nearly lost her balance. Octavius was leaning against the door jamb, one booted leg crossed in front of the other. He looked absolutely delicious in his fawn breeches and burgundy coat, and she wanted nothing more than to race across the room and kiss him senseless. Fortunately, her passions were not in charge at the moment.

He hadn't moved but stared at her with a light in his eyes that unnerved her. This wasn't the harsh, unyielding man who had refused to hear a word she said the night of the ball. This was Octavius, the man who had tried his best over the last few weeks.

Regardless, he wasn't going to receive an easy reprieve.

She stood her ground and ticked her chin up a notch. "If you are

here, why did you send a note? You could have simply announced yourself. Better yet, you could have sent the note ahead and informed me of your coming. I am in no mood for..." Her breath hitched. "One moment. What did you say?"

His gaze skittered away from her. "I said 'That is the Eleanor I know.'"

She narrowed her eyes and took three steps toward him.

"I might have also used the word 'love,'" he admitted, straightening to his full height. "I think I got ahead of myself."

Her heart skipped a little faster. Even at her most optimistic, she hadn't expected to hear that word from his lips for months, years, possibly never. Yet, despite the giddiness beginning to bubble inside her, she agreed with him. He was ahead of himself. There was much that needed saying before those words.

They could start with the easy questions. "Is Henry with you?"

"Of course." Octavius gestured behind him. "He has missed you terribly but, well, the coachman offered to let him take the reins and drive the carriage to the stables, so..."

Eleanor smiled. "That's our son. Always thrilled to try something new. I shan't hold it against him."

Octavius strode over and stopped within arm's reach of her. He not only looked good, he smelled good too. For good or ill, though, he didn't touch her.

"There are many things you could hold against me, my beastly behavior from the other night chief among them, but I hope that you will find it within your graciousness to forgive me."

The heady combination of her husband's contriteness and familiar scent made Eleanor dizzy. She steadied herself then tipped her head up. "You think I might forgive you?"

He took a half step forward and breathing became much more difficult. Something flashed through his eyes, and she was surprised to note it wasn't doubt. "Yes, I do. And I'm prepared to beg if necessary."

The urge to take him in her arms and forget the difficulties between them was strong. Almost overpowering. But their future hung in the balance. She wanted a true marriage with Octavius. She wanted to hear those words of love he'd hinted at. Even more than those things, though, she wanted to know that their relationship wasn't going to be a pattern card of harsh, spiteful accusations followed by remorse and reunion. Her love for him was boundless,

but she loved herself too.

She did the wise thing and backed away from him, avoiding the more intimate sofa and sitting down in a chair. "I'm listening."

He took up residence on the sofa, their knees inches apart. So much for the crucial distance she'd been seeking.

Resting his forearms across his thighs, he looked across to her. "This would be much easier for me if we were sequestered in a dark room behind the bed curtains."

She smiled softly at his joke but shook her head.

He lifted a shoulder in resignation. "I paid my mother a visit before leaving London."

Only the word "love" sneaking past his lips had surprised her more than this pronouncement. The desire to hug him was stronger than ever, so Eleanor clasped her hands tightly in her lap. She said nothing.

"I came to the realization last night that I'm just like her: emotionally selfish, prone to lashing out in anger when life isn't perfect..." He sighed and stared at the carpet. "I've always blamed her and her infidelity for driving my father to kill himself. As with most assumptions I make, I was wrong. She's not without her faults, but my God, Eleanor, she lived a nightmare with my father and his unpredictable behavior." He looked up, his brown eyes blazing, and she couldn't doubt his sincerity. "I don't want to be like her. I want to be me, and I not only want to be loved by you, I want to give that love back to you a hundredfold. But..."

He'd lit a flame that was melting her resistance. Even so, she needed more, and for once she was going to be selfish and get it. She smoothed her gown over her legs and said, "I'm still listening."

To his credit, he didn't sigh or falter. His voice, though, was a mere whisper as he continued. "Even though my mother says I'm nothing like him, I'm so afraid I'm just as mad as my father was. I don't want you to live with what my mother had to. I've always been afraid of that."

Eleanor stared at him, for once unsure of what to say. She settled on the obvious. "Octavius, you aren't mad."

He barked a disbelieving laugh. "How can you say such a thing after the last few weeks? After the way I reacted to Drummond's lie. After the way I exploded at the Ardmores' house. After the way I reacted to you writing to my mother."

She lost the battle with herself. Reaching across the distance

between them, she took his hand and squeezed. “You are passionate, I will give you that, but you *are not* mad. Anyone would have been upset by those things. But you recognized when you were wrong and attempted to make things right. Trust your mother. Trust *me* on this. You are not crazy.”

His grip on her hand was tight as could be. She held on as his eyes brightened. “This is why I love you. You always know what to say.” He swiped his other hand across his eyes. “Eleanor. It’s important to me that you know I want you in my life. Your mother acted as if she didn’t want you. *I* once made it clear that I didn’t want you. But I’m a fool, as we both know. *I want you for my wife*. I want you to be the mother of my children. I want you as my friend, as my confidant, as my lover, as the person who bashes me about the head when I’m intolerably stupid. That last, I’m afraid, is most likely to be a daily occurrence.”

“Oh, Octavius.” Eleanor propped her arm on her chair and let her chin fall into her free hand. “I hate to tell you so, but I could listen to you talk like this all day. Possibly well into the night too.”

“I do have more to say.” His hold on her hand loosened, and he stroked his thumb across her knuckles. “I am sorry, Eleanor. I’ve hurt you in so many ways, and honestly you shouldn’t still be listening to me. You shouldn’t forgive me. But I know you will. Because you love me and I believe in that love.”

Eleanor rose and crossed to a table where a beautiful display of garden roses had been arranged. She inhaled, letting their sweet scent calm her, and then she turned back to Octavius. “What if I do not forgive you?”

He blinked up at her. But she had to know what he’d say. What he’d *do*.

Silence. Warm air from the open terrace door ruffled her skirts as it stretched between. Then, Octavius slowly stood and closed the gap between them. He raised his hands and cupped her cheeks. “If you choose not to forgive me, I will return to London and leave you in peace. I will not stop loving you though.” He tipped her head back, and she was struck by the passion—emotional not lustful, not mad—on his face. “I promise to listen with my head and love with my heart. I promise to be the husband you deserve, the father Henry wants, and the brother Portia needs. I promise to apologize when I make mistakes because of course I will. I’m not perfect and never will be. But I promise to never stop trying. I can do this,

Eleanor. I want you and I love you. I'm beholden to you forever and always, and I will do whatever it takes to give you what you need. If you aren't able to forgive me right now"—he drew in a shuddering breath—"I understand, but I will not give up hope that we can heal us."

I can do this. Out of everything he'd said, those four words meant the most. In the past he'd been unwilling to even try. Now he was promising forever. Octavius didn't make promises lightly.

Those other three words hadn't hurt, either. She'd thought for certain he would choke on them.

She took his hands in hers and drew them from her cheeks, holding them between their bodies. Happiness nearly overwhelmed her, and she had to bite her lip to keep from smiling from here to London. "I'm afraid I cannot forgive you."

He stiffened, almost imperceptibly, but she felt it. Then came his reply, swift and intense. "Please, Eleanor, I beg you to take pity on me. I know I don't deserve your forgiveness but—"

Fulfilling his request for pity, she pressed a finger to his lips. "Shush. I cannot forgive you until you forgive me. Writing to your mother behind your back was not my best moment, and once I realized how you truly felt about her I should have told you what I'd done."

Just as quickly as his tension had come, it was gone. "Eleanor. My sins are far greater and I—"

"I insist. We must forgive each other or this marriage will never work."

"Very well, I forgive you," he said with impatience.

Eleanor laughed, feeling a thousand times lighter than she had in a week. "I forgive you too, as you so presumptuously seem to know." She sobered a bit and let the silkiness of his cravat slip between her fingers. "I was beginning to think you weren't coming, Octavius."

He pressed his lips to her forehead. "I'm a dolt. I probably would have regained my faculties sooner if you had stayed and rung a peal over my head, but I am glad you didn't. I needed to realize for myself what your love means, and I needed to acknowledge my love for you. I can do this, Eleanor. I can love you."

"The words are practically flowing off your tongue."

"I know." His smile held a touch of arrogance. "I had no trouble telling Henry how much I love him. *Because I mean it.* I love you

both so much.” The arrogance slipped away. “That’s not to say, however, that I’m not terrified about this whole family and marriage business. I have no idea what I’m doing but am committed to you, to Henry, to Portia. And to any other little Maynes who might join us.”

Though she’d always wanted more children, especially a daughter she could educate and inspire in absolute contrast to the way she herself had been raised, Eleanor couldn’t help but be cautious. “Are you certain, Octavius? I don’t want us to be overwhelmed when we are just finding our way with the family we have now.”

“As always, you are far wiser than I. However, I insist that at some future point in time you favor me with a little girl who is just like you: intelligent, warm-hearted, persistent.”

“I will do my best,” Eleanor vowed. “May I ask one thing of you?”

“You may ask a thousand and they shall all be granted.”

She stroked a finger down his jaw. “Oh dear, I shall be terribly spoilt.”

“Rightfully so, in every way imaginable. What do you wish?”

“I want to live here. I don’t want to go back to London, except occasionally perhaps.”

“Absolutely,” he said with a firm nod. “I’ll live wherever you are, though I will need to return to London occasionally to oversee the arsenal and my other businesses. I confess I enjoy the manufacturing process more than an earl probably should.”

“One more thing.”

He nodded patiently.

“Did you say that you bribed my mother?”

A touch of wariness crept into his eyes. “I did. I’m sorry I didn’t consult you first, but I couldn’t stand the way she was haranguing you at the ball. I’ve set up an annuity in her name and she’s to stop begging you for money forever. Not very politic, I know, but—”

She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him with all the pent-up love and joy she’d been too wary to reveal. To her surprise, he clasped her waist, lifted her off the ground, and spun them around in a circle. She couldn’t help but break the kiss and laugh.

Face lit by one of the smiles she would never tire of, he set her down and tugged on her hand. “Come outside. We need more room.”

“More room for what?” she asked as he pulled her out the terrace door and onto the lush lawn.

Once there, he swept her up by the waist again and began to turn in circles faster and faster. The sky, house, and trees flashed by her eyes in a vibrant blur. Her skirts whished through the air. The most glorious feeling of all, though, was the way her husband clutched her to him—as if she meant the world to him and he’d never let go.

Eleanor closed her eyes, threw back her head, and reveled in the love. Around and around they went until Octavius stumbled. They fell but he rotated and hit the ground first, securing her against his chest. Even after they landed hard, Eleanor felt a rumbling beneath her breast. She lifted her dazed head to find Octavius laughing and gasping.

Never could she have dreamed... Very well, she *had* dreamed of a life like this. And now here it was, right beneath her.

“Quite fun, isn’t it?” Octavius managed at last.

“Very, my love.”

She wiggled her way closer to his mouth. After giving him one last chance to catch his breath, she shoveled her hands beneath his head and raised him up to meet her kiss. Only now did it hit her how much she had missed him. Missed the intensity that always hovered around him. Missed his fledgling sense of humor. Missed the way he said her name, as if he were in awe of her. Missed the way he kissed. Oh, had she missed this.

His wonderful mouth abandoned her lips and scorched a trail toward her ear, his breaths hot and delicious against her skin. She shifted, wanting to feel more of him against her. He responded by flipping her onto her back and pressing light kisses along her neck.

“I quite liked the position I was in,” she protested into his ear.

He paused his exploration and she felt him smile. “Well, there is not much you can do about it now.” Emphasizing his point, he leaned more heavily into her, pressing her back to the ground.

How quickly he’d forgotten her secret weapon. She let him resume kissing her jaw and then stealthily slipped her fingers inside his coat. Beneath his waistcoat. And then finally under the edge of his breeches. At last she attacked, tickling him in his most vulnerable spot, that ridge right below his waist.

He howled in protest and tried to escape her strikes. That’s when she used her own weight to push him over and onto his back again.

She settled against him, his thigh conveniently intruding between her legs.

She smiled deviously. "Who has the advantage now?"

"You. Always you, Eleanor."

She rewarded him with a kiss.

"What the dickens! Eleanor! What are you doing?" Portia's screech carried across the lawn. "Lex! How can you—?"

Eleanor had never jumped up so quickly. She nearly tripped over Octavius's boot, but he rose too and steadied her with a hand at her waist as he stepped behind her. She soon realized why he'd taken such an odd stance and devilishly pressed her bottom against the hard ridge of him. The low-pitched growl of her name was satisfaction enough. She shifted slightly away but positioned herself so that Portia wouldn't catch an eyeful.

Portia, cheeks burning red, glared at them. Eleanor folded her hands in front of her and tried to look contrite, matronly, and composed all at once. She undoubtedly failed on all accounts.

Before she could gather her wits to speak, Octavius's voice rumbled from behind her shoulder. "It's wonderful to see you, sister."

Goodness, who knew he could carry on with such aplomb after a debacle like this?

Even faced with her brother's civility, Portia struggled with containing her mortification. At last she turned and stomped toward the house.

"Portia, wait a moment!" Octavius released Eleanor and strode toward his sister. A surreptitious glance told Eleanor his composure was complete.

Surprisingly, Portia did stop, though she didn't turn back.

"I am sorry for our indiscretion," Octavius said. "Eleanor and I were simply...celebrating that I am here to stay."

The girl's shoulders dropped an inch at that pronouncement, but was that good or bad? Slowly she turned, her eyes flashing in a way that Eleanor knew didn't bode well for Octavius.

"Are you here to stay? Or are you going to leave at the first sign of discord?"

"I am committed to Eleanor through whatever may come."

Portia put her hands on her hips, her Drummond-blue eyes sparkling fiercely in the sunlight, looking far more like a warrior than the slip of a girl she was. "You had better be, because if you

ill-treat her again, you will regret it. I will make certain of it.”

Octavius linked his hands behind his back. “Your warning is duly noted.”

She nodded and made as if to leave, but her brother spoke again. “I wonder if you might take a walk through the garden with me tomorrow. I would like to discuss our family history.”

Her nod was cautious, but she agreed.

“Thank you,” Octavius replied.

This time she did start for the house, but he continued. “One more thing. Eleanor is not the only one I’m here for. You and Henry mean the world to me. I love you, Portia.”

Her pace faltered, the only sign she’d heard him, but she kept walking and soon disappeared inside the house.

Eleanor moved to Octavius and laid her head on his upper arm. “Don’t despair. She’s coming around.”

“This is indeed progress. She’s ready to defend your honor. At my expense. And I can’t say I fault her for that at all.”

Eleanor laughed and tucked her hand in the crook of his arm. They daren’t touch any more than that at the moment, but she wasn’t ready to let him go.

“Mama!”

Henry came barreling around the corner of the house, a spaniel puppy yipping at his heels. He flung himself at her skirts, and she had no choice but to release Octavius. She caught him up in a hug and showered kisses over his cheeks and forehead.

“I missed you, dear boy.”

He briefly allowed the onslaught but then pulled away. “Maaama. I wrote to General Wellesley. And I played in the park every day. One day we had cake for breakfast. I think we should do that at least two times a week. Perhaps three.”

She glanced over her shoulder at her husband, but Octavius’s gaze had wandered to the blue sky above. She smiled.

Henry jabbered on while petting the rollicking puppy’s belly. “I am going to stay with you for a fortnight, Mama. Then I will return to London. Isn’t that right, sir?”

Eleanor rose, and this time Octavius met her gaze. “No. Our plans have changed, Colonel. All of us—you, me, your mother, and Portia—are going to live here at Mayne Castle.”

“Together? For how long, sir?”

“Forever.”

Eleanor had not heard a sweeter word from that deep voice.

Henry grinned and started backing away from the puppy that was now trying to climb up him. "Excellent! There'll be enough time to show you the secret door I found. And to find your cricket bat. Oh, and you can play the dastardly lord who tries to steal the fair maiden—that's Mama—only I'll rescue her."

"She is a fine maiden indeed. I may put up a quite a fight for her."

Henry was halfway across the lawn, running from the dog again, laughing and shouting over his shoulder, "You won't succeed!"

Octavius slipped up behind Eleanor again, and he rested his cheek against the side of her head. "Why do I have the feeling I will have to fight that boy for a bed tonight?"

Eleanor turned and laid a hand on his cheek. "I wish he wouldn't call you 'sir.' Shall I speak to him and ask him to call you Papa or Father?"

"No. I've come to like 'sir.'" Octavius's eyes softened. "There's a certain...affection to the way he says it. If he someday decides to switch, that's fine. But for now, I couldn't be happier."

Fully aware that his broad body blocked any view from the house, Eleanor swayed against him and trailed her fingers through his cravat, down the buttons of his waistcoat, stopping at the lowest one. She flashed him a wicked look. "Are you certain you couldn't be happier?"

He grabbed her hand and laced their fingers together. "Eleanor Mayne, the best thing I ever did was marry you."

She couldn't agree more.



~THE END~



To stay up to date with my latest releases and learn fun historical facts, sign up for my newsletter [here](#).



FIND CHARLOTTE:

- ♥ [Website](#)
- ♥ [Twitter](#)
- ♥ [Facebook](#)



Acknowledgments



Let me start by *not* acknowledging how long it took me to write this book. It's a miracle Lex and Eleanor survived the neglect they suffered over the years! As usual I am thankful for the love, support, and feedback of the Rainy Day Writers: Kristine Cayne, Josefin Kannin, Dawn Kravagna, KL Mullens, Shannon O'Brien, Sherri Shaw, and Marianne Stillings. You ladies never let me give up on this story and I'm grateful. Much thanks and a big hug to Janna MacGregor, who is always encouraging and always available for a plotting session. For making my writing a thousand times better, I am most appreciative of the editing skills of Chris Keeslar. And finally, thanks to my husband and kids for their patience. You guys are the best.

Don't miss out!

Click the button below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Charlotte Russell publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

Sign Me Up!

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-CQDB-ENDJB>

BOOKS  READ

Connecting independent readers to independent writers.

Also by Charlotte Russell

Gentlemen of Honor
[One Wicked Weekend](#)
[Under the Kissing Bough](#)
[Stranded with the Earl](#)

His & Hers
[His Duchess](#)

Phoenix Sidewinders
[Hot Corner](#)

Standalone
[Splendor in the Moss](#)
[Beholden](#)

Watch for more at [Charlotte Russell's site](#).



About the Author

Charlotte Russell didn't always know she wanted to be a writer. At one point she had grand plans to be an architect, until she realized she couldn't draw anything more complicated than a stick figure. So, she enrolled at the University of Notre Dame and studied her first love—history. Now she puts all that historical knowledge to good use by writing romances set in Regency England. When not pounding on the keyboard or tending to one husband, two cats, and three children, Charlotte is privileged to serve the people of her community at the local library. She's resided in numerous, varied locales, including Indiana, Mexico City, Phoenix, and Seattle but currently calls the heartland of the USA home.

Read more at [Charlotte Russell's site](#).